

TALL WHEELS TO OREGON

Lovelace Powers came to Reading's Flat in the early days of the pioneer trek to the West, travelling with her old father, Jabed, in a wagon train of fortune seekers and poor settlers to the mushroom growth of shacks and cabins on the edge of Rainbow Valley. Their arduous journey was safely over, but their joy at reaching journey's end was marred by the mysterious death of Ben Hyland, who had been found murdered on the extremity of the caravan by Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond, the two hired scouts.

From the time of the discovery of the body, Lovelace had had to endure the unwelcome attentions of Spink, who apparently had some influence, if not a hold, over her father. Even when she and old Jabed had settled down in Reading's Flat, Spink was always menacingly in the background and, when Lovelace fell in love with a young farmer from Rainbow Valley, the real danger suddenly materialized like a frightening spectre ahead.

Also by VINGIE E. ROE

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TALL WHEELS TO OREGON

BY
VINGIE E. ROE



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1

THE BRASH NEW LAND

HIS was the West in its first stirrings to the avalanche of white men bearing down upon it. They came in wagon trains, on horseback and afoot. They overran its mountains, dug frantically in its myriad gulches and sniped along its river beds, for they were after gold.

They were young men for the most part, strong and eager, heady with the freedom of the virgin world about them, and to a great extent they had been, by some strange alchemy of that very freedom, released from the niceties of law as they had known it. They swaggered and swore and worked tremendously, filled with the flame of adventure, drunk on more than the hard liquor they consumed, their weathered hats tipped forward from behind, daring the world to knock the chips from their shoulders.

For the most part they were such. There were sober ones among them to be sure, doctors and lawyers, merchants and traders and those who, looking down the years ahead, shrewdly took up land. Land lay all around them for the taking, fecund and rich with its centuries of mellow mulch, ready for the plough and seeded field, a paradise for stock.

Of this breed was the man sitting with hands crossed on his pommel on the rim-rock of Rainbow Wall, a thousand feet above the flat floor of the valley spread out below. He, too, was young, not more than twenty-five or six, and he was razor keen. Keen of the blue eyes beneath his worn wide hat, of the brain behind them, of decision, thought and movement.

And he was strong. Every fibre of his rail-hard body was like whipcord, thin and tempered and dependable. The horse he rode was strong, too, fiery and fierce with life from the top of

his high withers to the bottom of his shining hoofs. A five-year stallion, he, too, was lean and hard, for he had carried his master across a Continent two years before. All along the Great Trace from Independence, Missouri, they had come together, to stop at last in the wide and lovely valley underneath the monstrous wall. Now the man smiled as he looked down upon this silent, sun-lit world, for it was his. As much as any holding in the almost lawless land could belong to any man it was his. His by right of settlement of a few scant buildings, of a hundred head of cattle and of seven colts and fillies and their half-wild dams. The younglings were the progeny of the coal-black stud beneath him, and they were his pride.

The mares were many-coloured, bay and brown and dapple grey, even a pinto and a clay-bank with a Blucher stripe, but in every case the colts were black.

Price Malloy's dark face lighted and he slapped the stallion smartly on the shoulder.

'Pretty fine, my bucko,' he said after the fashion of those who spend much time alone, 'pret-ty dam' fine! They look like black diamonds on a golden cloth.'

The horse, resentful of the slap, lowered his head, shook his heavy mane and bawled. He struck the stone of the rim-rock with his right fore-foot and the sound rang in the high stillness like a bell, for he was shod. The shoes he wore were priceless. They had been hand-forged in Missouri and they had come across the Plains. He had worn them since his hoofs were big enough to fit them and no one but his master had ever set them. They were heavy and beautifully made and they gave his natural rocking gait a balance and a grace.

'Yes, sir,' the man said softly, 'we've done right well, Cochise.'

Then he reined away and, drifting back from the rim-rock, set the stallion into a dim trail which descended rapidly behind the Wall's south end. Here the jumbled mountains broke sharply, falling away to small valleys where gulches poured their winter waters, and in one of the flats there lay a town. A tiny town with everything in it. Built along a road that was deep with dust in summer, mud in winter, it boasted structures built of bricks which had come round the Horn in ships' ballast, their

huge iron doors hinged and bolted with metal, their steps and raised porches made of adzed-off timbers. This was Reading's Flat, and it was road's end. North, over the Siskiyous, no wheel had yet turned toward the Oregon Country, though a thousand pack mules loaded in the Flat each day. The place was a smouldering maelstrom of activity.

A sort of madness lay upon it, for no one knew or could estimate the riches that lay, heavy and dull like dirty pebbles, in the gulches and along the slopes of the Trinities toward the west. Men went out with pick and pan, inexperienced and uncertain, and at week's end came in with garments sagging, their eyes bulging with excitement. They rolled the nuggets in their palms and bragged. They threw them away on the dirty canvas of the gambling tables, on liquor and the few women of a certain sort who were available, broke themselves and went back to do it all over again. Life in the diggings was a restless uncertain tide, its roots nowhere; neither in this new land nor in the eastern country which they had left, and to which many of them, though with the best intentions, would never return.

Price Malloy rode into Reading's Flat this early fall day, dismounted and tied Cochise to the peeled sapling hitch-rail before the Hank Baker Store. He took a flour sack—for whose contents he had paid one dollar a pound last month—from behind his saddle and clumped up the four plank steps to the porch and entered. The big room was full, as usual. Card games were going, along the rough bar on the north side, ragged boots and fine-stitched ones crowded the sapling foot-rail, while the rest of the place, lined with shelves and countered, did a rousing business in supplies, for no matter how they drank and roystered, men must eat. Voices hailed him as he pushed back his hat and grinned at the crowd.

'Hi! Look at th' farmer!' someone yelled good naturedly. 'Foller'd a plough all last spring when he might've made himself a keg of gold jest fer th' shovelin'!'

'Now ain't that something?' Price drawled. 'Yes, sir, it sure is. But maybe, my bucko, just *maybe* I'll be here and sitting pretty in my big valley when you're gone and all those pokes of yours are empty.'

Laughter followed this and Price threw his flour sack on the counter.

'Seems I eat a hell of a lot for so flat-bellied a man,' he said plaintively, 'guess you'll have to fill her up this time, Hank. Beans and coffee and saleratus—though that's the yellowest saleratus I ever saw, judging by the colour of my biscuits. Just can't ever make 'em come out white.'

A Mountain Man in dirty fringed buckskins guffawed loudly.

'Know whut you need Price?' he asked, elbowing up to stand beside Malloy, his moccasined foot on the rail, his eyes lively above his flaring dark beard.

'No, Sam,' Malloy said. 'What?

'A womern,' the other said decisively, 'a womern, that's whut. Why'nt you get you a nice young squaw? They can cook an' keep a man's house—provided he keeps a stern hand on 'em. An' some of 'em're dam good lookin', too. Nice to look at an' to—they got th' softest skin.'

'Maybe, maybe,' Price said hastily, 'and I've got respect for the brown ladies, Sam. They can be pretty faithful sometimes. I mind that prospector who got both legs broken up in the Sierras year before last. When they found them in the spring it showed plain as plain how his woman had dragged him for miles, hunched on her shoulders. She couldn't make it to get him to Doc Higgins at Red Shirt Gulch, but she didn't leave him. His arms were still around her neck—next spring when the snow melted.'

'Yeah,' Sam Blunt said slowly. 'Yeah—I mind that, Price.'

While Hank Baker filled the flour sack, Malloy drank slowly and with great relish his own particular brand of 'poison'. This was the Lemon Squash whose formula he had brought from Sacramento two years before, given him—for a price—by the only man in California who knew it, the bar-tender at the Stinking Tent in that brash and swaggering new city.

It cost him two dollars a shot, with lemons, brought up from Peru, at one dollar each, but it was worth it and he never drank but one.

So now, when his glass was empty, he set it down and looked around the big room, rank with tobacco smoke and the smell of

unwashed males, with pleasure in the scene. Price Malloy liked his fellow-man. He liked the world and all life in it. In fact he liked life so much himself that he hated to destroy it in anything. He went for months without venison with the deer thick on the slopes because he didn't like to face the wild brown eyes when he had to slit a throat. Soft, somewhere deep within him, yet hard when he had to be. He had had to be a time or two to get where he was, but he'd made that hardness swift and sure and then forgotten it.

'Take a hand, Price?' someone called from a poker table, but he shook his head.

'Nope. Got to be getting back.'

'What to? Them empty shacks under th' Wall?'

'Yep. I got a mare about to foal—real young one—and she might need help.'

'Mid-wife, eh?' the other said and a roar of ribald laughter followed.

'Best in the country,' Malloy answered. 'So long, boys.'

He shouldered his sack of supplies and left the store, tied the sack behind Cochise's saddle, slapped the stallion gently on the rump and walked up the moiling street to Hartnell's blacksmith shop. He needed horse-shoe nails, something he never allowed to give out entirely, for those heavy shoes on Cochise's feet must at all times be firmly set.

He passed the new brick building in which had recently been hung the first Masonic Charter to reach the West, brought overland by Peter Lassen, and noticed the pack-train loading with gold before the Wells, Fargo Company's place. He wondered how much of the heavy, raw metal went down to San Francisco every week. Well, he wasn't interested too much in gold, though he panned enough himself to buy the things he needed. As he neared the blacksmith's shop a young woman in a full-gathered calico dress and a frilled sun-bonnet came down along the street. She walked with a certain grace, the free-swinging movement of bounding health, and she was red-headed and blue eyed with a dust of freckles across her pert young nose. She was Susie Hartnell, prim and pretty, and she had deftly altered her course toward the other side of the street when she caught sight of Malloy.

She walked a little faster, so as to pass her father's shop and meet him before he entered.

'Why, hello, Price,' the girl said with a note of surprise in her clear young voice. 'Haven't seen you for a coon's age! Where you been keeping yourself?'

Price took off his hat. He was one of the few in the new country who did in a lady's presence.

'Hello, yourself, Susie,' he said pleasantly, 'where you suppose I've been keeping myself? Out in my valley, of course, where there's a power of work to be done all day and every day. How you been?'

'Fine,' said Susie, her blue eyes steady on his face, only I'm lonesome.'

'Lonesome? In Reading's Flat where the whole new world goes by? I'm surprised at you, Susie.'

'Well, I'm not,' the girl said sharply, 'with every man in sight running around like mad after gold. They don't think of anything else. They can't talk of anything else! Where's there one of them willing to sit down in Ma's best room and drink a cup of tea? You tell me that, Price Malloy! I wish to Heaven we'd stayed back in Ohio.'

The man pushed back his hat and considered the matter of Susie's loneliness in the midst of life with judicial gravity. It was one of his charms where women were concerned, that taking seriously their smallest troubles. After a silent moment he smiled at her and snapped his fingers.

'I have it,' he said, 'just what you need! Why don't you go back to Ohio? There's a bunch of folks heading out for back east next month, I hear. Disgruntled, don't like hardship. No real pioneers. Five families of them. I bet your pa could hire your way with them for a song—and you'd be back where there are parlours and tea tables and men who wear starched collars. That's it, Susie,—and if I don't see you again, why, the best of luck and be a good—'

But Susie jerked her sun-bonnet forward and switched her skirts angrily away.

'You!' she said furiously. 'You—you—. You're just like all the rest, Price Malloy! And I don't need your luck.'

She walked swiftly past him on her way to the store and Malloy grinned as he entered the blacksmith's shop.

'That kid girl of yours, Jim,' he said to Hartnell, 'is a pretty spitfire. Just telling me how rude and crude and generally no good we men-folks are out here.'

'Yeah,' her father said between strokes on the hot iron on his anvil, 'you know what's th' matter with her, Price?'

'Girlish fantasies, I suppose. Remember my twin sisters back home, three, four years ago.'

'Not th' fantods, no,' Hartnell said. 'Susie knows what she wants, like her Ma. An' she wants you or I miss my guess.'

'Me?' yelled Malloy, astonished beyond words. 'Me? Oh, no! Not little Susie!'

'Little Susie,' her Pa said firmly, 'is nineteen years old. I married Jane when she was three years younger.'

'Well, I'll—be—damned!' the younger man said slowly, and there was distress in his voice. 'Jim, I wish you hadn't told me that.'

'What's wrong with knowin' th' truth, boy?' the blacksmith said.

'Nothing, of course,' Price answered, 'but I'm not looking for a wife, Jim. There's too much work, too much—well, lonesomeness, maybe, in my situation. I'd want no woman to share it—and I'm not in love with anyone.'

'No harm, Price,' Hartnell said, 'just thought I'd tell you.'

'Well—thanks. Thanks, Jim,' and Malloy turned and left the shop, forgetting completely what he'd come there for.

He walked swiftly back toward the store where he'd left Cochise, the sense of disaster still heavily upon him. He threaded among the pack-burros, waiting hip-shot in the dust, the wagons, many still wearing their white canvas tops, and the saddle horses tied along the hitch-rails. As he turned around a huge pile of boxed goods just in by freight teams from Red Bluff out in the Sacramento Valley where the steamer *Jack Hays* had brought them up from San Francisco, he stopped dead in his tracks. Two men stood beside the big black stallion and one had just bent to run experimental fingers down along his left foreleg. Cochise flinched and snorted, stamped with his shod hoof, and

the man struck him hard on the shoulder. Price Malloy went forward like a shot. He caught the man and whirled him away.

'Hands off that horse!' he said harshly. 'What you think you're doing?'

'Nothin', you son-of-a-bitch!' the other said. 'Can't a feller look—'

Price hit him then and he didn't finish for he was six feet away with his face in the dust. He got up like a wildcat and came back on the run.

'W'y, you—you——' he gritted as he sailed in. In two seconds there was as pretty a fight shaping up as one need to see, there in the road before the Hank Baker Store, and in a few more it had its delighted audience.

'Go to it, Price!' someone yelled. 'What's it about?'

'Feller hit Cochise,' someone answered.

The man trying hard to knock Malloy off his feet was a stranger.

He was short of stature, broad and heavy, and his face, red with the fury of instant battle, was heavy also. He wore no beard, but a thick moustache parted over the crease in his upper lip and curled stiffly out along his cheeks. His eyes were small and dark and now they blazed red like an animal's in the night. He fought like a fury, and had it not been for Malloy's speed, his lightness of foot, the outcome would have been certain. But too often his savage blows struck only air and in a matter of minutes he began to tire. Strong as he was, as powerful, those very things worked against him. He lunged and thrust with so much of himself behind each effort that he began to breathe like an engine's exhaust, his mouth open. And suddenly the man who had been with him moved forward from behind, an arm up and crooked for Malloy's throat. But over the mêlée a voice spoke, loud and sharp.

'I wouldn't, Mister,' Sam Blunt said. 'Stand still.'

His right hand was out a little, waist-high, and on its palm laid the sweetest-balanced knife in California. The other paid him no attention but shot that raised arm forward and dropped it over Malloy's head.

At the same instant the knife left Sam's palm like greased

lightning and drove itself, hilt-deep, along under the biceps beneath the faded shirt-sleeve. With a yell of pain the stranger fell back, clutching his elbow, and Sam jumped and drew his precious weapon out.

'We like t' see fair play in these parts, Mister,' the Mountain Man said calmly, and Price Malloy landed one hard blow in his opponent's face and the affair was over.

'Jest who are these folks?' someone wanted to know, but no one answered as the two men drew aside together.

'Someone get Doc Prindle,' Malloy said loudly. 'This man's bleeding. And thanks, Sam. That was pretty work.'

'Twa'nt nothin', Price,' Blunt said. 'I jest plumb hate to see injustice. An' a sneak from behind's that or I don't know it when I see it. So long, boy.'

'So long,' Price said, and climbed in his saddle.

As he went up the dim trail toward the rim-rock of Rainbow Wall his brows were drawn together in thought. Three hours ago he hadn't had a care in the world, beyond a bit of anxiety over the young mare's foaling, and now he'd made two enemies, to say nothing about the unwelcome and disturbing knowledge that little Susie Hartnell had set her mind on him.

'Funny how things happen, all of a sudden-like,' he told Cochise as they climbed, 'and maybe change a man's outlook over night. When he don't want a change, either. Just too dam' funny.'

Half-way up the trail where a small spur jutted from the parent ridge Malloy stopped, as was his habit, to let Cochise blow a bit. He turned in his saddle with a hand on the stallion's rump and looked back down the way he had come and all over the long and narrow valley that was Reading's Flat. It always gave him pleasure to study the vast wild land and to wonder what it would look like in the opening future when men and ploughs and lumber had done their work with it. Ranches, he told himself contentedly, when the gold was gone. Fields and grazing stock, homes and roads and little one-room school-houses where the kids could learn their 'three R.s'. It was a good dream he visioned, the dream of all first men to pierce a wilderness, and he smiled a little, thinking of it. Then he swung around

a bit and swept his glance toward the south where the road from the Big Valley came in around the dropping end of the ridge, and suddenly he straightened, his blue eyes narrowed under his hat-brim. For in a little flat beside a stream there was something new, something which had not been there when he'd come down the trail so short a time before. This was a familiar sight in the new country, namely the night-formation oval of a wagon train.

Its white-topped 'schooners' stood out against the golden background of dry summer grass, and there was activity about it. The figures of men and horses, oxen and a few cows, tiny at this distance, moiled about in the practised business of making camp. Already the thin smokes of cooking fires threaded upward in the still air, sounds as thin and distant came up to him. Cochise saw it, too, his head high on his crested neck, his eyes wide, his nostrils flared to catch its alien scent.

Man and horse stood statue-still for a long time, watching, and for the first time in two years Malloy felt no sense of pleasure in the advent of newcomers. Instead, a strange chill went down his spine, a faint, dim premonition of disaster. This, he told himself, accounted for the two men in the town! Scout-riders; going ahead to find the lay of the land for those who came behind. Then he shook himself mentally, reined Cochise away and went on up the trail toward the high rim-rock of Rainbow Wall. Well, what of it? Free country wasn't it? The freest—and biggest—that lay out-doors anywhere. Room for everyone. Sure there was. And he was as full of fantods as—as little Susie Hartnell! He grinned at that, ruffled the stallion's thick black mane with a rough affection and rode on, whistling through his teeth,—off key and unconscious of the fact.

It was the last time he was to ride that trail with a tune between his teeth for many a long, long day.

SHADOWS OF TROUBLE

THE sun was low in the west when he came out on top of the ridge and rode along the rim-rock. The great precipice which walled his valley on the western side was dark with shadow, its casting twilight already spreading far out along the level floor. Over at the north-east the tiny cluster of his buildings huddled under a small stand of trees, mush-oaks and willows, beside a little stream. It was a living stream, spring-fed in the slopes of the farther range of mountains which rimmed the valley at the east, and it was priceless. The man smiled as he looked down on this bit of the virgin world which was to him the most desirable spot he had ever seen. The mares and the younglings had grazed in a narrowing circle toward the pole corrals, for though the grass was rich and plentiful on the valley's floor, the corrals held a lure. This was the small ration of corn doled out each night, and which had done so much to tame and gentle the band. That corn was the cause of the ribbing he took from the roystering miners, for he had followed a plough to get it, had built the sapling stake-and-rider fence which had protected its growth. That he was a farmer for little gain was riotously funny to the eager flotsam who dug the gulches, panned the creeks, and flung away their gold, high-wide-and-handsome.

It was not funny to Hank Baker, though, nor to Jim Hartnell, nor to Henry Bilder of the Silver Star Saloon. These men, too, looked down a future where the structures of new civilization rose on the solid foundations of honest work, of settlement.

'We'll be here, Price, like you say,' the storeman said once, 'when all these fellers are gone to God-knows-where. Oh, some of 'em's smart enough, I grant you, to send their surplus down to 'Frisco with Wells, Fargo, but 'tain't th' majority. *They* think

these here hills an' gulches are *made* of gold, but they ain't. Some day it's going to peter out, and you mind what I say. 'Twon't be no-ways soon, I figure, but it's sure to come—sure as hell.'

Half a mile farther on the great wall of the precipice came to an abrupt end and the trail went sidling down along a receding slope which carried the mountain ridge on toward the distant north.

It was almost dark when Malloy rode into his home corral, unsaddled Cochise, put him into his loose-stall in the snug log stable, fed him, and went about his small chores. The mares were looking eagerly over the saplings by then, and he let them all into the biggest of the three corrals, scattered ears of corn, still in their white shucks, about among them, fed and milked his one good cow, pulled the ears of the blue shepherd dog which leaped around him, and went on into the small log house. This was a man's house, pure and simple. Handmade chairs, table, bunk and wall shelves comprised its furnishings, and a wide stone hearth bedded a big fireplace. An iron crane hung in it, made by Hartnell at his forge, and swinging from its hook a blackened iron pot held the last of his beans, still warm from the banked-in fire. Their rich aroma filled the single large room and the man grinned with anticipation. He raked open the ashes, added wood from the waiting pile against the wall, and in three minutes the leaping flames made light in the darkness.

'Pretty fine, Blue Boy,' Price said to the dog, 'pret-ty dam' fine! Hungry, eh? Well, so'm I. Just a minute now-just-a-minute.'

And so, forgetting for a time the untoward happenings of the afternoon, he settled down to the contentment of fire and food and shelter, and to the perusal of a three-months-old newspaper from across the continent.

It was evening, too, in the little flat out south and east of Reading's Flat where the new-come wagon-train had made its camp.

It seemed a poor train, made up of folk with little substance in this world's goods, and there was about it an apologetic air. Its stock was worn down with the great travail of the Crossing,

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its wagons had been mended and mended again, their canvas tops thin and weathered.

But there was nothing apologetic in the spirits of its people to-night. They laughed and talked in a continuous web of sound that rose above the camp like something tangible, called to each other across their fires with happy voices,—for this was Journey's End. This was the goal toward which they had set their faces nearly half a year ago, back on the banks of the Missouri river,—and they were here! Here was that wild, far West of which they'd heard so much. Here was—must be—the gold that lay spade-deep for any man's taking. And here, too, there was land. Land for the taking, also, by those among them so minded. And there were such. Every bearded man who had a family behind him looked to the land itself, to a future of grain and orchards, just as Price Malloy was looking in his cabin under Rainbow Wall. And into this atmosphere of gaiety and well-being rode the two men who had gone ahead that noon to see what the new world offered of civilization. As they entered the western opening of the long oval between the tongue-and-wheel-locked wagons a wave of quieting rode with them, for their faces were grim and the slighter of the two carried his left arm in a sling of dirty cloth.

They stopped by the first fire and the big man scowled down at those about it.

'Where's Cap'n?' he demanded.

'W'y, he's somewheres around,' Pete Henty said, 'was at th' hind end yonder a minute back. What's up, Syl? Something wrong?'

Neither of the riders answered, but rode on down the middle of the camp toward a group of men who stood talking around a fire where women cooked. One of these, a tall, spare man, straight of back and eye and tongue, was Stephen Reed, the Captain of the train. Now he looked up as his two scouts bore down toward them.

'Evening, Sylvester. Evening, Judd,' he said courteously as he always spoke, 'glad you're back. What did you find at Reading's Flat? We're all anxious to know—Why—what—?'

For he had seen the sling on Judd Pond's arm.

The squat man spoke then.

'We seen some right unfriendly folks, Cap'n,' Sylvester Spink said thinly, 'an' Judd's got ev'dence to th' fact.'

The Captain's genial face hardened.

'Do you mean to tell me,' he said slowly, 'that you two've got into trouble already? Even before we've had a chance to meet the folks of the town ourselves?'

'I ain't aimin' to tell you anything, Cap'n,' Spink said sharply, 'once this here train's disbanded—which I figger will be to-morra. But's of to-night I do tell you that a feller jumped me fer nothin' over there—jest because I laid a hand on a high-falutin' black horse which turned out to be his. An' when Judd here tried to give me a hand, some damned son-of-a—'

'Mind your words!' the Captain shot in. 'Before the women-folks. Go on.'

'A buckskinned Mountain Man—like we seen t'other side th' Rockies—flang a knife an' could a-killed Judd easy as not.'

'But didn't?' asked Captain Reed. 'Must be an expert thrower. Go on. Why?'

'Well,'s I said, Judd just give me a hand an' he flang. I'll see him some day, th' damned—'

'Never mind,' said Reed, 'just tell us about the Flat. How big is it? Has it got real stores? Are there houses—and families?'

'Sure its got stores an' houses. There's women there, too. Saw a few of 'em. An' kids, plenty. Lots of loadin'—pack-mules. Must be a passel of diggin' goin' on all round, with that much supplies headin' out fer th' gulches. I'm aimin' to be among them myself before many hours.'

'That's all right with me, Syl,' the Captain said quietly, 'and we'll settle up for your scout-duty at train-meeting to-morrow morning.'

'You better,' the man said harshly, 'as agreed at start. Chip-an'-chip-in, 'twas agreed. Fifty cents a day—an' it's little enough, with what we went through while th' rest of you jest rode along behind.'

The hard look was still in the Captain's grey eyes.

'The people of this train are honest, Sylvester,' he said quietly, 'and will stand by their words to ~~the men~~. To-morrow morning you'll get your pay.'

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'We earned it. Every dam' cent.'

'Certainly you earned it, Sylvester,' the Captain said reasonably, 'and we all appreciate your work. To-morrow, then.'

He turned away toward his own fire beside the head wagon of the oval at the right, and the two scouts rode on down to where the last wagon in the train, set lengthwise, closed the far end of the formation.

This was the poorest outfit in the train. The wagon itself had been a source of trouble to the entire company with breakdown after breakdown, its double span of oxen were old and worn. And the man who tended them was old, too, though more in spirit, it seemed, than in years.

He was Jabad Powers, tall and spare and bearded, whose blue eyes above their dark hollows bore a look of tragedy.

But poor though it was the Powers outfit bore one shining gem, the slim young woman kneeling by the fire at the moment, carefully tending a pot of rabbit stew which bubbled on the raked-out coals. She was tall like Jabad, and straight as a young sapling, and the whole beauty of her, face and figure, had had repercussions in the train all through the summer-long journey across the Plains. Among the men she was conceded to be the stuff that dreams are made of, strong and beautiful and courageous, and, like Cæsar's wife, above reproach. She had walked among them circumspectly, declining gently but firmly, all male attempts to win more than her friendly favour, and she was devotion itself to her father, whose sole remaining family she was. Among the women of the train it was another matter, that is with a goodly part of them, for no woman of her physical perfections could help but be a source of jealous fear to her less favoured sisters.

But neither favour nor disfavour had been of great import to her, for Lovelace Powers had the rare gift of standing on her own two feet with perfect self-respect, perfect self-belief. Whatever she did must be right between herself and God, and that was all that mattered.

Now she looked up as the two men approached her cooking fire and smiled as she smiled at everyone. Her face was flushed with the heat, a lock of her curly brown hair hung, gamin-like,

down over her forehead and her brown eyes crinkled at the corners.

And as he looked down at her the hard face of Sylvester Spink underwent an amazing change. The sullen anger left it as if a hand had passed across it, wiping it clean of baser things, and raw human hunger stood out plainly on the coarse features.

'Evening, Sylvester,' the girl said pleasantly, 'supper's almost ready.'

'Evenin', Lacey,' he answered and swung down from his weary horse.

Sylvester Spink was a hard man, a hard driver of bargains, a hard horsemaster, and it was the whispered opinion of the train that he would be hard on a woman, too. Now he took the tired animal outside the oval, unsaddled and turned it loose to graze with the other stock scattered over the floor of the little flat and eagerly cropping the rich, dried forage. Its back was crusted with salty sweat at the blanket's edges, but he did not so much as wipe it off with a handful of grass.

He took off his hat and smoothed his thick hair with his hands, brushed down the front of his vest, the shirt beneath, and walked back inside the oval. Judd Pond came back from putting his own horse out, and the two riders sat down on the warm earth to wait until the meal was ready, for they had both 'found their vittles' as the saying went, with the Powers' for more than half the Crossing. For this they paid Jabed Powers a fixed amount of their carefully hoarded money each week, and fared far better than they would have on their own, for Lacey was a good and careful cook, and Jabed, old as he was, walked and hunted often, so there was usually meat in the pot.

Now as the girl dished up the food in big tin plates, pulled the pot of coffee from the fire's edge, her father came in around the wagon's down-hung end-gate. He came up and sat down on an upturned wooden pail and his eyes flickered to the faces of the men.

'Evening, boys,' he said.

'Evenin', Jabed,' they answered and fell to eating with all the rabid hunger of outdoor men after a day's activity. Jabed Powers looked at Judd's bandaged arm, but it was characteristic of his

attitude with them that he did not ask about it. He asked little of Sylvester Spink, ever, waiting the younger man's pleasure in the matter of conversation, even though the four of them did constitute a family after a fashion. And the haunted look in his eyes was hidden as he kept them on his plate.

'Pa,' said Lacey gently, 'you eat more of this stew. It's extra good. It's got some bay leaves in it.'

'Tis so, daughter,' Jabed said, 'and I will—just's soon's I finish this. You gave me an extry lot.'

'Maybe I did,' she said, laughing a little, 'but you don't eat enough. You worry me.'

She reached over a hand and laid it on his bony knee, and Jabed patted it.

'Don't you worry over me, daughter,' he said, 'I'm fine's a fiddle. I am so.'

The sun went down behind the mountains at the west, and the small concourse of people, pioneers in that vast creeping tide which was on its way to a new world, gathered around the leaping fires to talk eagerly of the morrow and what it would bring of disbanding, of entering the town, of setting up separate camps temporarily, and of a future bright with hope.

Neither Judd Pond nor Sylvester Spink took any part in this. The former, nursing his injured arm which by now was throbbing with the pain of a settled wound, rolled his blankets outside the camp and went to bed.

Spink still sat by the embered fire and smoked a short, black pipe, his hard eyes on the coals. What was in this man no one in the train rightfully knew, beyond the fact that he had a temper quick to flare as fire in tow, and that he never backed down from any stand once he had taken it. He had joined the Reed train on the banks of the Missouri and taken up with Judd Pond in the first weeks out. Their arrangement with the Powers' had come much later, when the train was six weeks on the Plains, and was a cause of wonderment to everyone, since Jabed Powers and his daughter stood high in everyone's respect, the two riders very near the bottom rung of the ladder. True, they were good scouts, given to spurts of reckless courage, and their service to the train had been invaluable in the matter

of crossing streams and finding the sparse game of the regions hunted over by those who had preceded them.

But neither their joining the Powers', nor the Powers' acceptance of them had been of great moment, since it had happened not so long after the one tragedy which had befallen the outfit. This was a pitiful and mysterious killing, for which no one among them had been able to find a reasonable solution. It had happened on the Sweetwater, in a warm summer day when little white clouds sailed the tall skies and the scent of prairie flowers blew on every gentle wind, and it had to do with Ben Hyland, a single man who drove just behind the Powers' in the train.

Ben Hyland was gay and jovial, well liked by his fellows, and he was accounted rich by the standards of those around him. He wore good clothes, owned a fine rifle and drove the best horses, the best wagon in the outfit. And it was no secret that he was as wildly in love as a man could be with Lovelace Powers. Lacey Powers, who smiled on him kindly, as she smiled on everyone, but who still kept her own little space of touch-me-not around her. Ben was one of the best hunters in the train and often took one side of the vast terrain while Jabed took the other, to bring in the big jack-rabbits, the prairie hens, the quail which had managed to escape the scouring guns of the Argonauts ahead. During these times his big black teams were tied to the tailboard of the Powers wagon, which Lacey drove expertly. The girl walked a lot beside their own slow and weary oxen, using no goad or ox whip, but only her coaxing voice in its musical 'Hup, Jerry—Come on, Jude! Come, Buck! Hup, Bright!' whose clear carrying quality could be heard all up and down the line.

And then had come that bitter day when Ben Hyland had not come in at unspanning time. When Lacey had unhitched his teams and tongued his wagon in with theirs, and looked anxiously, standing high on the wagon's sideboards with her hand above her eyes, scanning the wide world around.

When Jabed had come in from the north with two jacks slung on his shoulder, and Spink and Judd had loped in from the south, folks had asked them if they'd seen Ben. 'Twasn't like

him to be late for the formation they said uneasily—Ben was a punctual man.

But Jabez had not seen him, since they'd set out in different directions, and a man could soon be lost to sight in the scattered scrub that was beginning to dot the prairies—and they had crossed a little stream two miles behind. Yes, the folk remembered, there had been shelter of a sort and a man might have a mishap. So the men of the train set out at once, scattering in a broad fan to cover their hind-trail and as much of the surrounding land as a man might traverse in hunting, and they carried torches to light when the twilight faded. They fired their guns at intervals, though ammunition was too precious to be wasted, and listened afterward. But only the silence of the Great Plains answered and the lighted torches flickered over faces grave with anxiety. Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond rode wide circles, calling off in the distance at the south, and finally the men heard them circling around toward the north to join the searchers there. And it was Spink who found him. Found Ben Hyland dead as stone, lying on the bank of the little prairie creek beneath a clump of willows—and he had been shot twice!

3

AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

*S*HOT twice! That was no accident. In dumbfounded silence, grave of face, his friends and neighbours stood around him horrified and filled with a very real sorrow. He had not been dead long, two hours, maybe, and presently they carried him between them, limp and sagging like a sack of meal. The women cried that night and among them was the girl whom he had loved so deeply, standing among the others unashamed and grieving for a good man gone, even though she had not loved him in return. They buried him next day, in the middle of the broad Overland Trace, and drove their teams and wagons over him to obliterate all sign.

The men of the wagon trains knew what the Indians did to graves along the way.

And so they had pulled on in a wondering silence, and there were long thoughts among them concerning the tragic matter.

Who had been out of the train that day? Who had been armed? Three men. Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond and—Jabed Powers. Spink and Pond, close-lipped, blandly unconcerned. Jabed full of distress.

'He was a fine feller, Ben was,' Jabed said sadly, 'wasn't a finer man in all this train. I miss his singin'.'

Others missed Ben's singing, too, and the silence continued.

Three men. Two had been south of the wagons, one north.

But why should any of them kill Ben Hyland? Who would have a motive? True, Ben was fairly rich, as riches went among them, but who could claim his things? His fine black teams, his good wagon and what it contained? No one would dare to do so. The outfit still pulled at the Powers' wagon-tail, tended by Jabed at night and morning, and the wondering went on.

And then those three men were together. Spink and Pond joined up with the Powers' wagon for two meals a day. Spink said briefly in explanation that he was tired of coming in so late from front-riding and frying his own pork and pan-bread, that he needed a woman's cooking to keep him at his job, which was a hard one if anyone asked him. No one asked him. No one asked him anything for his temper and surliness worked against him in folks' minds.

And it was then, almost on that very day, that Jabed Powers began to have that haunted look in his eyes. Lacey had shaken her brown head decidedly when the matter was broached to her.

'I don't like Sylvester Spink, Pa,' she had said uneasily, 'I don't want him around that much.'

'They—they'll pay, daughter,' Jabed had said anxiously, 'and we're mighty short of money for startin' in the new country.'

Lacey had looked at him hard and for a long time.

'We've got some,' she reminded him, 'and you know I mean to set up baking in the town. The way men like a woman's cooking in these out-places I can make money, I know that. And maybe you can mine some, too. We'll make out. We've never feared before, and it's late to be afraid now. Let's not take them, Pa.'

But Jabed had rubbed his hands together in an odd gesture of despair and looked back at her with such pleading that the girl waved a hand in capitulation.

'All right,' she said, 'I'll feed them, but don't expect me to be friends with them. I won't.'

And so for the rest of the journey over the plains, the Rockies and the High Sierras she had done just that. Sylvester Spink rode his daily way ahead and came in to her fire at night, and no one knew more of him than that. So violent a man he was, so arrogant and hard, that few cared for his company in any manner and it was left for Jabed Powers and his daughter to bear with him almost solely.

But strange as it seemed to those around them when this small-eyed man sat by the coals before the Powers' wagon his face was changed.

It was closed and hard still, but with some difference. There

was a smoothing on it, always as if a hand had wiped it of its day's marks, as if it waited for new writing. And sometimes, under cover of the early darkness falling beyond the embers' light, he would look swiftly at the girl busy about her tasks and look away again. So quick, so fleeting, so casual, were these flashing glances that not even Lacey was conscious of them. There was one who was, however, painfully and despairingly—her father. Jabed Powers missed no flicker of the man's eyes, no flash of hidden light in their shallow depths, and his work-worn hands would grip so tight that sweat would start in their palms.

And so it was the last night before disbanding.

People stood about and talked, filled with excitement and the laughter that well-being brings, glad of their goal reached, their long trail over.

To-morrow would see a new land adopted, a new life begun, new chances opened before them. Men talked of gold and land and planting, but mostly they talked of gold, for gold was the blood and bone and spirit of the time and place. The small fires were deserted, and the centre of the big oval between the wagons was like a thoroughfare full of folk who talked and moved and stopped and moved again, strengthening ties of friendship made in the long days of the Crossing, promising to keep in touch no matter where they landed in the new country. Women exchanged seeds and bits of cloth for quilt-blocks, and men arranged to help each other in the matter of log-raisings for their cabins, and a glow of shared happiness lay over the camp.

Only three people did not take part in this exciting moiling—Judd Pond, nursing his throbbing wound, Lacey Powers who was clearing her decks of everything possible for the morrow, packing most of her precious pots, readying the things inside the wagon, and Sylvester Spink who came suddenly in around the tailboard and stepped over the tongue of Ben Hyland's wagon. It was dark where he emerged and the eyes beneath the thatch of his hair burned red like an animal's in the night. The tip of his tongue came out and licked the heavy lips under the parted moustache, and that, too, was animal-like, as if a tiger finished with its kill.

Lacey had not heard his step, for, good scout that he was, he made no sound in the Indian moccasins which he always wore, and when he spoke she whirled to face him, startled.

'Evenin', Lacey,' he said hardly above a whisper. 'I scare you, girl?'

'No,' she said coldly, 'I don't scare that easily,' and turned back to the bundle of things she was fastening to stow away. '

Spink came forward and bent beside her.

'Here, let me,' he said.

With a frank and palpable distaste she drew back, drawing the bundle with her.

'No,' she said, 'but thank you just the same.'

Some of the hardness came back in the man's face. He straightened up and looked at her.

'You don't like me, do you, Lacey?' he said carefully.

'No,' she answered honestly, 'I don't.'

'Why?'

'How can I tell? I—just don't. Maybe it's because I think you're a hard man. You're hard on your horse.'

'Well, I'll be damned! A horse! A horse's to be used. A piece of prop'ty, just like anything else a man owns.'

'Like a woman, maybe?' the girl said thinly.

'Now look here, Lace—'

'Don't you call me *Lace*,' she said sharply.

'Well—Lacey, then. Though I don't know what difference it makes.'

'You wouldn't. That's what I mean. Part of it.'

'Well—of all the—'

He spread his legs apart, put his thumbs in his belt and pushed it down with an indescribably insolent gesture. Those animal eyes of his could see in the dark, like an animal's, and now they studied her face with a sharp, deep probing.

'Th' time's a-comin',' he said flatly, 'when you're goin' to want a man. When you'll *need* a man. Your Pa ain't goin' to last too long. He's pindlin' now—an' when that time comes—'

Lacey threw down the bundle with a furious force.

'Sylvester Spink,' she said, 'will you shut up and get out of

here! I don't have to listen to you! Not any more! And I don't intend to! After to-morrow morning—'

'To-morra mornin' ain't goin' to change anything, so far's we're concerned. I aim to board with you folks, once you get settled, right along.'

'Oh, no, you won't! I'll see to that.'

'You jest ask your Pa,' Spink said mockingly, and went away in the night.

For a long moment Lacey Powers stood by the wagon's high wheel, her hand on the worn tyre, and there was a frown between her straight dark brows. There was a strange coldness somewhere inside her, too, as if a wind of portent had blown across her spirit.

The next morning saw the disbanding of the Reed wagon train.

With everyone gathered in a wide circle inside the last formation, Captain Stephen stood in the centre and talked earnestly.

'We've been a good organization,' he told his people, 'a successful one. We've made a venture and we've come safely through. All of us,' he added sadly, 'except that one we left lying alone in the Great Trace. None of us are going to forget Ben Hyland. And speaking of him we might as well finish with his business while we are still together. As most of you know, Ben was a lone man. He left no living relatives back East, according to what he's told us many's the time, therefore we must make disposal of his things among us—and that's going to be a hard matter. I suggest that we parcel them out by lots,—one team—and the other one—the wagon—and what that contains—number them, put the numbers in a hat along with blank ones to the number of adult males among us, and let some child draw them out. Those holding the corresponding numbers to get and be sole owners of those parcels which they represent,—with the provision that anyone drawing two or more lots must put back the surplus, keeping only one. Does that seem a just and wise adjustment of this sad affair? Aye or no.'

To a man the train said 'Aye', and within the hour the thing had been done. Tom Smith drew the first black team. Adam

Dunlavy drew the second, and that was a good draw, for it was well known that Adam's oxen were on their last legs and had barely made it to the last formation.

The Reverend Archibald Tanny got the wagon itself, and with a strange irony of fate Sylvester Spink drew its contents. At this development a silence fell upon all the gathering, why, no one knew, but there was in it a seeming of disapproval, as if, somehow, the dead man had been affronted by the fact. That Sylvester Spink, of all of them, should have access to those small secret treasures which Ben must have carried, was unthinkable. Pictures, maybe, daguerrotypes of mother, sisters, father, all dead and gone, as Ben had said, and maybe money, for he was accounted well-to-do. Well, it was fair-draw, chance and chance alike, and they had so ordered it by public acclaim. And presently Captain Stephen went on with the matters in hand. He accepted and compared the paper which Spink offered as his and Pond's claims for payment of scout duty for all the days which they had served, read it aloud, said it was correct, and asked a man to pass a hat for the promised chip-and-chip-in of every wagon's share. Spink took the money, counted it laboriously and put it in a dirty canvas sack which he had brought to hold it.

Then Captain Stephen called for each man to step forward and state briefly his plans for the new future opening that day for all of them,—where he would settle, what he meant to do to gain a livelihood, and when he would need help in his log-raising. This was a matter full of eagerness and excitement and men nodded and laughed, slapped each other on the back and promised to settle close that they might be neighbours.

The actual disbanding, when Captain Stephen formally gave over his command, voted to him at the start, held just a bit of sadness, for this train, poor though it was, had made the Great Traverse in peace and that priceless thing in any wilderness, the close accord of good fellowship.

When it was over the teams were inspanned, drivers took their seats or walked beside their oxen, and Captain Stephen on his gaunt white horse rode out ahead, and for the last time sang out in his rich deep voice the starting call, 'Rooolll Out!'

Journey's end and Reading's Flat lay just ahead.

They camped within the hour at the settlement's south confines and Captain Reed rode back along the wagons, holding up his hand for silence and attention.

'There is one thing I forgot to mention,' he called loudly, 'and which I must say now. In the matter of Ben Hyland's death I wish to state that, if I ever know who killed him—and I consider he was murdered—I'll leave no stone unturned to bring the guilty man to justice.'

He dropped his hand and that was his last pronouncement to the train as such. Camp was made hurriedly, and to a man the male contingent set out in a straggling body for the town, crawling with activity as its varied business of the day went forward. Their advent brought slight attention, except as to their numbers. Men were coming into and going out of the bustling, feverish gold town every hour of the twenty-four, and these trail-worn people were no exception.

Captain Stephen headed for the Hank Baker Store and the more serious-minded followed him. The rest fanned out and quickly lost themselves in the Silver Star Saloon, the Hurdy Gurdy gambling hall, or among the moiling miners, prospectors and hunters who filled the one wide street.

Spink and Pond ranged themselves at the saloon's long bar and proceeded systematically to fill their hides with liquor. This took money, but they had it, especially Spink who bought the best and asked the bar-tender for his fanciest and most potent beverages. Tim Simms, the bar-tender, a seasoned wilderness man himself, smiled as he complied. He'd seen dried-out Argonauts before, men who had crept across a continent in sun and wind and storm, and he knew the pent-up inhibitions which that vast travail put into them against their will, the flood-gate spilling of themselves when it was done. These two would drink themselves into a state of bemused arrogance and then go looking for women, Trixie and Minna and Lilly Ann at the Hurdy Gurdy, and perhaps they would be broke to-morrow. But to-night would be to-night and to-morrow was another day, and Tim mixed them his fanciest fancy potions, and Spink's small eyes were already dulling with their effects. Not so with Judd

Pond. Here was a man who could hold his drink, even after a six months' drouth, and though he was quiet as always, he was by no means dull. He drank, and watched the room, and kept an eye on his companion, and Tim wondered a bit at his capacity as the hours passed.

At the store Captain Reed introduced himself courteously to Hank Baker and talked long and earnestly, asking many questions about life in the new country, where the best free land lay for farming, and at what edge of town they might build their temporary cabins, since winter was not far off and they must prepare for it.

'Any place you like, Captain,' Baker told him cordially. 'Reading's Flat has th' whole of th' valley to grow in, and we're proud to have you, sir, to settle amongst us. There's a future for California, an' we first folks all feel it so. Well, maybe I'm a little brash to say that, since there's a lot of drifters, th' gold-men, here to-day an' gone to-morra, who laugh at that statement whenever anyone makes it. Say when th' gold's gone so will th' settlers be, but I don't hold with that, and a lot of far-seein' men don't either. I take it you're one of such.'

'I hope I am,' Reed said gravely, 'in fact I've *got* to be, since I've cast my whole life on this venture—mine and my family's as well. We mean to settle and stay. We met some outfits on the Trace who were headed back East. Said this country'd never be anything but a wilderness, and if the Indians didn't scalp us all we'd presently starve to death.'

'Sure. We hear of those folks from time to time, but they're few compared to th' ones who stay. And's for Indians, there ain't none around here that would lift a hand to a white man. Diggers and Pomos, mostly, friendly an minded to attend their own business strictly. Fishers an' deer-eaters. Sell us fresh meat when they're amind to hunt more'n necessary for their own needs. Nothing to fear from them. As for food to keep from starvin'—any man with a rifle can have meat th' year round. Hills full of deer, some bear, mountain quail. We carry th' staples here at th' store, brought up from Yerba Buena—they're callin' her San Francisco a good deal now—by boat to Red Bluff on th' Sacramento and in here by freight-teams. Of

course such things are high—dollar a pound for flour, sugar th' same—but it can't be helped, considering.'

At the startled look on Reed's face Hank Baker laughed.

'No one's starved yet,' he said pleasantly, 'an' a settler's credit's good here at th' store, in reason.'

Captain Stephen smiled relievedly and held out his hand.

'I'll remember that, Mr. Baker,' he said earnestly, 'and that you didn't have to say it. I'm not too well heeled—no one in my train is—but perhaps we won't need credit, though it's a heartening thing to know it could be had.'

The two men shook hands, and as they grinned at each other they recognized a friendship that was to last their lives out, begun that moment.

'Seems like we saw some Chinamen as we came in,' Reed said, 'fellows in black thin clothes and braided hair.'

'Course you did. We're lousy with 'em. Poor creatures are th' butt of every man's hard jokes—an' more than that. They're considered only a cut above a varmint by most, and are kicked around fit to turn a decent man's stomach. But you mark me, Mr. Reed, when th' white man's done with th' diggin's and gone, the Chinks will still be here an' they'll get rich on their betters' leavings. The prospectors won't dig a mite below a spade-length. Too cocksure. But th' Chinamen will go down an' clean th' bedrock.'

So it was that new people settled in that fall at Reading's Flat.

True to their agreements they set to work at once building for each other the small log cabins which must do them through the winter. These were close together, seven of them, excepting that one for Jabez Powers and his daughter.

'We must be closer to the town, Pa,' Lacey said decisively, 'if I'm to start my baking. Folks must see the sign.'

And so they did within two weeks from the time of their arrival.

The cabin itself was small, but divided into two rooms, one for Jabez's bed, the other for Lacey's own domain. Here was set up without delay the small but good iron cookstove, which had added so much to the weary oxen's load, but which the girl would not give up, walking herself a deal of the way

across the plains to balance its weight. Here stood the good new table whose boards had cost them a staggering sum and which Jabed made by hand. Here were shelves and the girl's small bunk against the wall. Here, in short, was a *business* begun within two days after they moved in, and across above the cabin's front door was a smooth new plank on which stood out in bold black paint, the words :

BREAD AND DOUGHNUTS ON TUESDAYS,
THURSDAYS AND SATURDAYS
Lovelace Powers, *Prop.*

Needless to say 'folks saw the sign'. Every male who passed the new cabin cast bulging eyes upon it, every mouth watered helplessly with memories of kitchens half across a world. And they saw Lovelace Powers, Prop., too, when she went boldly to the Hank Baker Store to drive her bargain for supplies. In her clean, full skirted calico, her brown head bare in the autumn sun, her amber-tinted skin glowing with the subdued bloom of health, she went briskly up the broad plank steps and in among the motley crowd of men who filled the big main room.

Hank Baker saw her as she came in the open door and went hastily around the counter's end to meet her.

'Good morning, ma'am,' he said loudly so that his voice carried to every corner with a warning note. 'Welcome to th' Flat. I take it you're Miss Lovelace Powers of th' new bakery.'

'Yes, sir,' Lacey said almost as loudly, 'and thank you. I've come—if you can spare me a few moments—to talk to you about the supplies I'll need. About prices, mostly. In fact, almost all about prices.'

She looked him squarely in the face with her long-lashed brown eyes and Hank Baker smiled.

'That's what a merchant is for, Miss Powers,' he said, 'to talk to customers—an' surely enough about prices.'

He walked behind the long counter and the girl stood before it, her hands laid easily upon its worn surface, her lovely face lifted, serene and earnest, to look up at him. There was no self-consciousness about her, not the slightest unease at finding

herself the only woman among this horde of men. And with her advent a silence descended on the room usually loud with oaths and laughter, with obscenities and jokes and sometimes drunken brawls, for this girl carried with her that greatest of weapons, self-respecting courage and faith in her fellow-men.

No one had ever offered her harm, no one ever would; her attitude said plainly, and these rough men felt it instantly. And she was so amazingly lovely to look at that they stared in silence, filling their woman-hungry hearts with her beauty.

At a table in a far corner, two aces and a pair of jacks in his unguarded hand, Price Malloy glanced up at her, laid down the cards and did not finish what he had been about to say. Like those about him he looked at the girl's trim back, at her little head where the chestnut curls, brushed tightly up and pinned, tried valiantly to get loose, at her straight, small shoulders carried like a soldier's.

There was nothing in Reading's Flat that looked like her, had never been. Her clothes were worn and faded, but they were ironed to perfect smoothness, and she wore them like a robe of silk.

In the dead silence her voice was clear and quiet, making her bargain with Hank Baker. So much for flour—a discount, assuredly, from one business man to another—and so much for sugar, for lard and salt and spices, though the latter were scarce, being a luxury and lightly stocked—and how about yeast? There was some, brought clear around the Horn from Boston by last month's clipper—.

But no, said Lacey, she had her own—both dry, which she had made herself before the start last spring, and everlasting, which she had kept alive the whole of the Crossing.

And so presently, when everything was settled between them, she smiled at the storekeeper, thanked him soundly and turned away from the counter toward the door. She looked neither to right nor left but straight ahead, the eyes of every man in the room travelling with her, and had almost reached the opening when a man came swiftly in across the sill.

Sylvester Spink, his face red with inheld anger, blocked her way.

'Lace,' he said imperiously, 'why'd you come here? Your Pa or I could've done this. This ain't no place—'

Instantly the staid decorum which had marked her deportment vanished.

With a sweep of her hand against her wide skirts to draw them as far from him as possible, the girl looked up and the brown eyes flashed.

'Will you get out of my way, Sylvester Spink?' she said thinly, 'or must I call for help?'

With a sound like surf on a shore the men behind her rose to their booted feet, but it was Price Malloy who reached her first.

'Pardon me, Miss,' he said, and stepped in front of her, between her and Spink. His face was suddenly stone-hard, his blue eyes half shut and narrow.

'And must I,' he said harshly, 'kill you after all? Now do as the lady says—get out of her way.'

He stepped around him carefully, keeping his face toward him, with the girl at his back. Spink raised on his toes as if to lunge forward, then stopped abruptly, his glance flashing back across his shoulder at the crowd of silent, watching men. He licked his lips and pushed his belt down and swaggered toward the bar, his face still red and furious.

4

THE CRULLERS CHARGE ON READING'S FLAT

AND Price Malloy walked down the store steps beside a strange young woman and it was as if he'd known her always. Her brown head was up, shining in the late summer sun, her eyes fixed ahead on the broad road that ran from Reading's Flat toward the south, and her lips were set together in a straight line. The man glanced at her sidewise and finally he spoke.

'I hope you don't think I take too much on myself, Miss Powers,' he said, 'but it just seemed as if I should walk a ways with you, just until you're closer to your place.'

'Thank you,' the girl said primly, then added with a little rush of words, 'it seems like that to me, too. I'm grateful, Mister.'

'Price Malloy,' he said. 'I live over the ridge yonder, in Rainbow Valley.'

'Rainbow Valley! What a lovely name! Are there rainbows in it often?'

'No. Hardly ever. It lies too low beneath its western wall—and that's where it gets its name. The Wall is a rockface, three miles long and a thousand feet high, as straight and sheer as a plumb-line drop, and gins the valley on the west. It is its colour that makes the bow, a living, everlasting rainbow of every shade in the spectrum, laced across the huge straight surface in long wavering lines of brilliant stone, just as it was thrust up in some prehistoric upheaval when the world was new.'

Lacey stopped and looked at him, her soft lips parted now, her eyes wide.

'How beautifully you speak!' she said, 'as if you love this place.'

'I do. Every foot of the great rock picture, every mile of the

long and level valley, every tree and hill that bound it at the east. It's a world apart—and mine.'

'I see,' the girl said slowly, 'and—I understand. It's something like a dream come true—something you visioned when you left the East, that you were coming toward all across the plains, the Rockies, the Sierras. I've felt the same thing—for almost half a year.'

'You came West because you wanted to?' he asked. 'Most women don't.'

'I didn't either at first,' she said honestly. 'I came because Pa was so lost when Mother died last year. Just wanted nothing any more, it seemed, until he met Captain Reed, who was organizing his train. Then there was a change in him, as if he saw something to live for again, new hope, sort of, and I was ready to do anything to bring back a look of life to his poor face. He's a good man, my Pa, Mister Malloy, but I worry over him. Lately he's slipped back into the doldrums, sort of. But as I say, once we were started for the great new world of California and actually on our way, I began to feel the dream myself.'

Price smiled down at her.

'And does Reading's Flat fulfil that dream?' he asked.

'Not yet,' she said. 'We've just landed, as you know, but it's a start. And the country's lovely. I'll find the dream, I promise you that. Some place all fresh and new—and mine, like yours—to live out my new life in.'

'A rainbow of your own?'

'Yes, a rainbow of my own, but solid and real, like your Wall.'

They had reached the doorstep of the new cabin with its sign above, and the girl said graciously, 'Come in, Mr. Malloy. I'd like you to meet my father.'

Jabed Powers, busy about some more shelves to hold the next day's first offering to the public, straightened and turned as they entered.

He smiled and held out his hand, answered the introduction cordially.

'Mr. Malloy's almost our neighbour, Pa,' Lacey said, 'lives over the high ridge over there.'

'Nice to meet new folks,' Jabed said, 'an' a man needs neighbours, no matter where he be.'

'And Pa,' the girl went on, 'once more Sylvester Spink's been insufferable. He came to the store and was mad because I went there. As if it was any of his business! Just because he's boarded with us so long is no sign he can tell us what to do. Mr. Malloy put him in his place and brought me home. I won't have him in this house again! I'll never cook another bite for him—and I'll tell him so, you may believe.'

Slowly Jabed laid down the hammer he'd been holding in his left hand, felt for the table's edge with the other and sank on the stool beside it.

The skin of his face turned a sickly grey under his iron-grey hair.

'Now—now—daughter,' he said, 'hold judgment, Lacey. Syl ain't so bad. He's just a mite crazy over you. Everybody knows that. And he's jealous—'

But Lacey slammed the leather handbag she had carried down on the rough table and her face flushed.

'Jealous!' she stormed. 'He's a fool! A vicious, overbearing fool! And if he don't let me alone I won't be responsible for my actions, I tell you that, Pa! Now let's apologize to Mr. Malloy—and I'll make us all a cup of coffee. Sorry it's not to-morrow, Mister,' she added, 'for my doughnuts will be ready by eight o'clock in the morning and I'd like you to taste them.'

'That's something to look forward to,' Price answered, smiling, 'and you may be sure I'll be one of your best customers. My mother used to make them when I was a kid, back in Ohio, and she could never fill me up.'

So, for the first time in two years, Malloy sat down in a woman's home and drank her coffee, ate a slice of homemade bread and felt himself a guest. It was a good feeling, a fine feeling, and he wondered how he had forgotten for so long what such things meant to a man.

He did not stay long, for the silence that had fallen on Jabed Powers with his daughter's burst of angry words still held and chilled the warmth which had walked with him from Hank Baker's store.

Riding up the ridge a little later he pondered wonderingly about the matter and came to a swift conclusion. The thing had happened swiftly with the mention of Sylvester Spink, and the blight was deepened by the halting defence of him, the slow sinking down upon the stool.

'He may be a good man,' Price told himself, 'but he's on Spink's side against the girl. Against his will, I take it, but still against her. Now I wonder why?'

When he reached his cabin it was to find Sam Blunt squatted against its western side where the logs were warm from the last rays of the setting sun, the fringes of his dirty buckskins hanging down his thin thighs, his black pipe in his mouth. His ancient, long rifle, clean as a hound's tooth, leaning beside him, his knife dangling from his beaded belt, he was typical of the Mountain Men who came and went in the settlements, living almost wholly on wild meat, penniless, free, eccentric and sometimes admirable. Best of the lot, according to Price's reasoning, was this friend of his. Now he smiled as he swung off Cochise. 'Lo, Sam,' he said, 'I'm mighty glad to see you. When'd you come in? Thought I didn't see you at the Flat.'

'Twan't becuz I weren't thar,' Sam said succinctly. 'I see you all right—a-walkin' off down th' road a piece with th' hand-somest young squaw I ever laid eyes on. Told ye so, didn't I? That that was what you need? A womern? On'y I didn't expect her to be white. Not with all them soft-skinned, luscious brown females around in the valleys jest a-waitin' an' fairly droolin' fer a man like you.'

'You do me right proud, Sam,' Price laughed, 'you do for fair. Only I'm not that conceited—I hope. And it wasn't because she was a woman that I walked with her, my friend. It was because a man—'

'Yep. I know,' the other interrupted, 'thet pole-cat we tangled with a few days back. Pity we didn't finish him off right then. We'll have to, soon or late, I'm a-thinkin'.'

He stopped and drew heavily on the pipe, sending out a thin blue line of smoke between his puckered lips, and Price waited, knowing him.

He watched his face, however, over the stallion's back which he was rubbing dry of sweat with a handful of grass. Presently Sam went on.

'Heered th' skunk talkin' to thet shadder of his'n, out back th' Silver Star, and though he can talk so low nobuddy without th' best ears in th' world, sich as mine is, could hear him. But I heered him. An' 'twan't good hearin' fer you. He spit like a wildcat an' said he'd have yore guts iffen it was th' last thing he ever done in life. So watch yore back-trail, boy, from here on—an' yore front—an' both sides. He don't ever aim to do nothin' in fair-an'-open, you can lay to that. It'll be behind rocks, an' in ambush, an' away from town where folks could see or know. I've seen his like before.'

For a long moment Malloy looked at the speaker. Then he nodded gravely.

'You're right,' he said, 'dead right. That's how I figure him.'

'An' it ain't only th' fight you fit him t'other day, neither. It's thet gal you was a-walkin' with.'

'Right again,' Price said shortly, and led Cochise away.

When he came back from the log barn Sam had risen, knocked out his pipe and was putting it carefully in a sagging buckskin pocket.

'Taint her on'y, either,' he said, 'it's another womern, too.'

'*Another woman?* Oh, see here, Sam! How much'd you have to drink to-day?'

'Don't hev t' be drunk t' see a womern,' the Mountain Man chuckled with a toothless grin. 'Can spot 'em a mile away. W'y, I mind me oncet—'

'Come on—keep to the present. What you mean—who?'

'Thet there red-headed young spitfire of Jim Hartnell's,' Sam Blunt said. 'I was a-settin' on th' porch at th' Silver Star, swingin' my legs over an' watchin'. Jest watchin'—everything. I shore like t' watch folks, Price. They're th' darndest fools! They run around in circles an' turn around an' run back like they forgot what they was a-startin' fer in th' first place. Worse'n a passel of pis-ants—though th' ants know in th' long run where they're a-goin' an' why. Ever take time t' watch ants, Price?'

'Can't say I ever did,' Malloy answered, 'but what'ev ants got to do with Susie Hartnell?'

'Not a thing,' Sam said, 'not a dam' thing. Thet red-head knows where she's a-goin', or I miss my guess. Her sun-bonnet was pushed back a mite on her pretty little head an' I saw her face plain as plain—an' by th' Great Horn Spoon! iffen it wasn't as mad as thet feller's you fit! It was so! She was jest white-mad, a-watchin' you walkin' off down road with th' new gal. Price, boy, hev you got troubles! Well,—guess I better be gettin' back over th' Wall. Nights come fast now, once th' sun's down.'

But Price reached out and slapped the lean shoulder under the dirty buckskins.

'What for? You can drink a skin-full to-morrow. Come on in. There's a haunch of young beef, prime as prime, in' the big pine tree. I'll fry us two steaks an inch thick.'

'Wa-a-ll,' the Mountain Man drawled, 'I mought at thet. Sounds good fer a change. Jest fer a change, mind you. Wouldn't give a fat little forked-horn fer all th' beef in Californy——'

'I know, I know,' Price laughed, 'but for a change—just for a change—and I've got plenty of coffee.'

He went into the cabin and Sam followed, so light on his moccasined feet that they never made a whisper on the adzed-off floor.

On Tuesday morning, true to her advertisement of the painted sign, Lovelace Powers, Prop., was ready for the opening of the business she had planned and dreamed about half-way across the Plains. She had been up since long before dawn and the old stove glowed and roared with good pine wood, its oven full of golden loaves, the big iron kettle on its top bubbling with melted lard. Three big pans of doughnuts stood on the long table, and out in the yard, stretched across before the door, there was a fairly creditable counter which Jabed had worked late in the night to finish. But early as she was, Reading's Flat was earlier. When she opened the door to carry out the first pans of doughnuts, a plank platter full of rich, sweet-smelling light-bread, she stopped in amazement. The male population of the town, it seemed to her, stood in the new dooryard. Fresh

from the roaring pleasures of the town at night, some still weaving on their booted feet, the drink dying out in them, others sober, but all eager, it was, nevertheless, an orderly, quiet gathering. To a man they smiled at the girl in the doorway, her dark face flushed, astonishment plain upon her, and presently she smiled back at them. Then Lacey Powers found her tongue and that rare command of a situation which was to stand her in good stead through her life.

'Gentlemen,' she said clearly, 'Good morning!'

'Good morning, Miss,' they answered in unison.

She set the big pan on the boards, pushed back the hair from her forehead and looked at them happily.

'I am surprised,' she said, 'to see so many of you, and I am grateful,' too. But also I am anxious. How can I divide my baking among you, so that every one may have a little? There just isn't enough to go around in any amount to each.'

A tall young miner in from Upper Gulch stepped forward just a bit.

'That's well spoken, Miss,' he said.

Lacey raised a hand toward the sign above her.

'Powers,' she said. 'Lacey—Miss.'

Someone laughed delightedly and the miner grinned.

'All right, Lacey Miss,' he said, 'why not count noses *an'* doughnuts, *an'* dole 'em out, one to a man. Then, if any's left you could start over—even cut 'em in two if they wasn't enough fer th' second round?'

'That's fine,' the girl said happily. 'Will you count for me, sir, while I bring out the rest?'

The method proved highly successful. There were seventy-eight men in the doorway, and one hundred and forty-six crusty brown crullers in the pans, and when the division was complete every man-jack had had a taste of such forgotten deliciousness as he had never hope to taste again. They carefully hoarded every warm and succulent crumb and licked their fingers nostalgically.

'And now the bread,' Lacey said. 'There are twenty loaves, and they are fairly large. Cut into quarters they would go around. Shall I cut them that way?'

'Sure,' the eaters chorused, 'that's fair an' even.'

'Not exactly,' someone said loudly, 'that'll leave half a loaf left over—an' I say we bid for that.'

'Done!'

Lacey cut the warm bread as evenly as possible and these men, all of them in from gulch and slope and river bar, without women and homes of their own, ate them on the spot, *sans* butter, beans or coffee, and smacked their bearded lips. When the counter was empty but for the lone half-loaf and the girl stood smiling behind it, someone was stricken with a tardy thought.

'W'y, by—w'y, I'll be darped!' a man yelled, aghast, 'we done et up th' lady's grub an' never ast her price! We ain't paid her a cent!'

'How much, Lacey Miss?' a man called from the back. 'Name yore price.'

'I don't know,' the girl said clearly, 'I don't know what would be right. In view of prices at the store—you think ten cents each for the doughnuts and twenty for a quarter loaf would be too much?'

'Too much?' they yelled. 'Hell—beggin' yore pardon—no! I say two-bits a cruller an' four-bits a chunk!'

'That's right!'

'Tain't none too much!'

'Sure ain't—and here's mine.'

The customers crowded close to the counter and buckskin pokes appeared, their owners fumbling at the strings.

'Better get us a crock, Lacey Miss,' someone called, 'don't want t' spill yore dust.'

So Lacey brought a crock and one by one the miners put into it meticulously seven pinches of the heavy, dull metal, dust and tiny nuggets, which passed almost entirely for currency in the time and place, a 'bit' being that amount conveniently held between the thumb and fore-finger and approximating roughly twelve cents. Two-bits, four-bits, six-bits, a dollar. The seventh pinch was for the broken cruller.

Flushed, round-eyed and smiling, the girl watched the little heap grow on the crock's bottom. She pushed up the

straggling curls from her forehead and when the solemn payment was finished she looked at them happily.

'My!' she said, 'that looks like a lot of gold to me and I thank you, gentlemen. But there's something I must tell you. At this rate I can't sell *three* days a week. I'll have to make it two, so each of you can have at least three dough-nuts and half a loaf—and that will take more time. So will Mondays and Fridays be all right?'

'You bet!' they told her, already visioning the ambrosial treat of the added amounts, 'an' we thank you for doin' this for us.'

'Dohn't thank me,' the girl said straightly. 'We're poor people, my Pa and I, and we hope to get ahead—and this will help.'

'Till Friday, then,' they told her and went away along the dusty road toward the town. Lacey gathered up the crock and took it inside the house.

'Look, Pa,' she said exultantly, 'at this rate, with what you make at mining, we'll have a start next year, and never forget it!'

'Sure will, daughter,' Jabez said quietly, 'we surely will.'

5

LOVE SHARPENS UP HIS ARROWS

S YLVESTER SPINK and Judd Pond had disappeared. Outfitting themselves with picks, pans and blankets, they had joined that crawling horde which infested the virgin country, digging 'spade deep' on slope and ledge and river bar. After the tense moment in the Hank Baker Store, Spink had flung away from the town in one of the towering rages which made him at times so blind and dangerous a killer, and Pond had followed, as he had followed for all the long weeks of the Crossing. It seemed as if he had no say about anything which concerned the two, was merely a hard and silent reinforcement at the other's shoulder, ready at a moment's notice to fling himself into any breach, as he had been ready that day in the open street when he dropped a strangling arm over Price Malloy's head. The wound along his arm was healing fast, though there was a weakness in the muscle of the biceps, which, though he did not know it then, would be with him always.

So the people of the Reed wagon train settled in on the flat below the roaring town to await the winter. Its women, glad of a roof over their heads, small though it was in every instance, of fire on a stable hearth, of a settled life after the interminable days of crawling at ox-pace across the Plains, were happy and eager. Its men fanned out to the gulches and the hills, trying their unaccustomed hands at the heady and fascinating business of finding gold—and some of them did find it.

Strangely it was that one among them who seemed least likely to do so, 'struck it rich'. Preacher Tanny, poorest of the train in this world's goods, working on a jutting shoulder of the western ridge, sank his new spade into a pocket of raw gold which filled his cupped hands twice. Shaking as with an ague

the good man sank on his knees to give thanks, then ran, stumbling and almost incoherent, back to the town and into the store, clutching his sagging pockets.

'Mr. Baker!' he panted. 'Mr.—Baker! Look! Look, sir! What shall I do with it?'

Hank Baker, seasoned with knowledge of the raw, new world, and of his fellow man, came around the counter and dropped a kindly hand on the Reverend's trembling shoulder.

'Well, I should say, sir,' he said smiling, 'weigh it first, find out what you've got, keep out what you need for your family's food for a while, an' take th' rest over to Wells, Fargo, to safe-keep for you against th' future.. Let's see. That's quite a pile' —as the Reverend Tanny emptied the pockets out on the counter,—'yes, sir! Quite a pile.'

And there was. Fifty-seven ounces, at seventeen dollars an ounce, it totalled up to the magnificent sum of nine hundred and sixty-nine dollars—more hard money than the minister from Missouri had ever seen at once in his whole life. And when it was safely apportioned that good man went home to his cabin walking erratically as though he might have been imbibing of that Devil's Brew against which he was always so earnestly preaching. His wife saw him coming and nearly fainted with shock, and it was midnight before the neighbours, going and coming, listening to the story of the find over and over, and delighted at his good fortune, had settled down once more.

'It's a good world, Pa,' Lacey Powers said contentedly, 'a good, good world.'

But Jabed Powers, sitting slumped beside the cooling stove, did not reply, and presently the girl moved to him, laid a hand on his shoulder. At the feel of bones beneath the faded shirt her face contracted with concern.

'Oh, Pa,' she said distressedly, 'what is it? What's come over you? Is it that you're so afraid we won't make it? That because you've not found gold yet you never will? Why, it's only a little while. Not three weeks yet since we landed—and look what we've got! What everybody's got! Cabins—and wood for the hauling in to burn all winter—and money growing in the crock like magic—'

'I know,' the old man said dully and betook himself to bed, leaving Lacey standing on the puncheon floor with a frown of worry between her straight brown brows.

But to-morrow was a selling day, and she had work to do, sponge to set in the big 'rising pans' she had bought at the store, her kettles to ready with their pounds of lard for the dropping of the doughnuts, both ring and twist, and she set about it briskly. The good feel of work, well understood, well performed, soon smoothed the frown away and presently a little smile came on her curved red lips, for she thought of the hungry men who would consume with such ravenous relish the results of that work to the last succulent crumb.

Men. One man. A tall man, dark of hair and skin, whose blue eyes crinkled with quick laughter. A man almost as young as she who rode like a centaur, his whole graceful body seemingly a part of the big black horse beneath him. To save her life she could not help a little thrill of pleasure that Price Malloy, from under his Rainbow Wall, would be among her customers. And so she smiled to herself, and set her yeast, and presently blew out the two tall candles which she had made back East and brought overland in the Conestoga, and went to bed in the narrow bunk along the cabin wall.

The morrow brought all that she had visioned, the crowd, eager but orderly, whose eyes brightened, whose bearded lips fairly drooled, at sight of the great golden heaps on the long plank counter, and Price Malloy on its outskirts with Cochise's rein across his arm. Price Malloy, who had had no time or place for women in his drive to get ahead in the new country, and who out-stayed his fellows now. When the last customer, blissfully filled with three cruller's each and half a loaf of tall, white bread, had reluctantly gone back to the fleshpots of Reading's Flat, he came up and looked at her across the empty boards.

'Lacey, Miss,' he said, grinning, using the odd arrangement of her name and title which had stuck since that first day, 'how you doing at the baking business?'

'Isn't that a silly question?' she grinned back, waving an eloquent hand at the empty wooden platters. 'See for yourself.'

'Looks fair,' he said judicially, 'yes, fair. And you've got a smudge of flour on your nose.'

'It's my nose, Mister,' the girl said, dabbing at that beautifully modelled member, 'and my flour—though I hate to waste a smidgeon of it at its ruinous price.'

'Ruinous?' Price said, craning over to look into the crock. 'At the price of what you made out of it? H'm'm'm.'

'Well,' she answered, leaning over to look too, 'seems like I did do pretty well.'

Laughing, they both looked up and found their faces close, the blue eyes and the brown gazing into each other so deeply that the laughter died between them and a slow, red tide came up along the girl's dusky throat to stain her cheeks, her forehead. She drew back quickly and began to gather up her crock, her wide plank platters.

'Let me,' Malloy said, as another man had said beside a wagon wheel, and this time she handed over half her burden, the crock heavy with its gold.

'You trust me with this?' the man said, smiling again.

She flashed him a glance and nodded her brown head where the small rebellious curls blew in the autumn wind.

'Seems so,' she said, as they carried the things into the cabin.

Cochise, standing tied to the ground with his dropped rein, raised his handsome head and looked anxiously after his master, whinnied a little deep in his throat.

Price turned back and looked at him.

'All right, fella,' he said, 'it's all right.'

'You love him, don't you?' Lacey said asked.

'I guess I do. He's the best there is done up in horse hide. What hurts him hurts me.'

'That's the way it is with love,' the girl said soberly, 'real love.'

'Is it?' Price asked softly and she flushed again.

'That's what they say,' she answered primly.

'Where's your father to-day?'

'I don't know. Out in the hills, I guess. I'm real worried over him, Mr. Malloy. He's changed so. He's not the same man, old but full of hope when we set out. Old now in very truth and

lost to hope, it seems, completely. I can't figure out how it happened, nor why he should be so.'

'That's strange. How long's he been this way?'

'Some months. Back on the Plains. Just seemed to let go, sudden like.'

'Anything happen around that time? Anything out of the ordinary run?'

'No,' Lacey said, shaking her head, 'nothing that could have affected him. Nothing bad happened to our train. We were very lucky. Nothing—'

She stopped, the big stirring spoon she had picked up stopping on its way to a little trough which Jabed had made to hold cutlery. She laid it slowly down.

'Something *did* happen,' she said gravely, 'the only bad thing. A man was killed. He was a hunter—and Pa was, too—but they never hunted together, because they took different sides of the Trace for more chance of game. It was Ben Hyland. He was a fine man. Everybody liked him.'

Malloy watched her gravely. Then, 'Was he a friend of your father's? Somewhere around his own age? Could he be grieving over him?' he asked.

'No,' said Lacey, 'he was a young man. Or fairly so. He—the folks said he—he liked me a lot. I liked him, too, but not that way. As a good man, a casual friend, a real fine neighbour.'

'Then—forgive me this—did Mr. Powers *dislike* him?'

'Oh, no! Pa never disliked anyone real bad that I ever can remember. He's a—a friend of mankind—I guess you'd say. Likes everyone and always says there's some good in even the worst folks, if you only know how to look for it.'

'I see.'

For a long moment Price Malloy stood by the table lost in thought.

Then he looked up and asked a strange thing.

'Lacey, does your Pa oppose your having beaus—discourage you from the thought of marriage?'

'Why, how funny!' the girl said wonderingly. 'Of course not. I don't have a—anyone I favour—because—well, I guess I just haven't seen anyone I—What you trying to say, Mr. Malloy?'

'I'm just trying to figure out what's worrying you so much. Why your father should be like he is.'

'I wish you could,' she said miserably. 'My Pa's the best man in the world and it's hard to see him so crushed down. So—so afraid. He's afraid, Mr. Malloy, though what of I just don't know. But it's in his face sometimes, plain as plain, in his eyes—and the way his hands tremble. I—just—don't—know.'

She looked away from him and Price saw her lips shake as she tried to press them hard together, saw the tears that gathered under her long brown lashes. Impulsively he reached out and took her hand, held it between both of his and turned her back toward him.

'Listen, Lacey Miss,' he said gently. 'We'll trace this matter out, you and I together, and we'll do whatever must be done to drive the fear away from Jabez, no matter who stands in our way.'

'Who stands in our way?' she said. 'Do you think it is somebody?'

'Yes, I do. No man fears like that unless it is another human who puts it in him. Sickness—death—men fear these things, of course, but not that way. Not visibly. Now dry your eyes and let's change the subject. I've got something to ask you. How'd you like to take a ride with me some day soon?—a nice long ride—on horseback—I've got a gentle little filly that you'd love out to my valley? I'd like to show you Rainbow Wall with the early sun on it. What say, Lacey?'

He smiled at her with a crinkling of his blue eyes and the girl looked up at him a trifle startled.

'Go riding with you?' she said. 'Why—that—that would be nice. But what would people say?'

'Say?' Price almost yelled. 'Why, good heavens, what could they say? Haven't young men and women ridden together since the first wild horse was tamed? It's as natural as breathing, seems to me.'

'Yes—I guess it is. And oh, it would be lovely! I've not been on a horse since before the Crossing, though I used to ride a lot back home. But I have no side-saddle, Mr. Malloy.'

'I'll see to that. And can't you call me Price, Lacey?'

'Yes, I can,' she said with a little rush of pleasure, 'and oh, I'll love to go! But it must be the first day after a selling day, because I'll be freer then.'

'So be it, then,' the man said, and loosed the hand he had been holding so warmly between his own, 'and we must start early to catch the miracle of sunrise on the rockface. Next Thursday be all right?'

'Oh, yes,' she breathed with rising excitement in the soft tones of her voice, 'and I'll be ready.'

'"I'll be ready"—who?' he asked, grinning.

'I'll be ready—*Price*,' Lacey Powers said.

Malloy rode slowly back into the main part of town, his hat pushed back on his head and his hands crossed on his pommel.

'Now where,' he asked himself, 'am I going to get that saddle I so brashly promised? Susie Hartnell's got one—but guess I better not ask her for it—not if what Jim thinks is true of her—the young brat! Mrs. Baker—that's it. I'll talk to Hank.'

But as he entered the store and threaded his way to the counter among the motley crowd that filled the room, diffidence fell on him like a hand. For the first time he gave a moment's thought to the little matter of his strict—so far—avoidance of feminine entanglements.

It was the sight of Sam Blunt leaning against the bar on the other side that drove into him the realization that he'd picked himself a woman! For that was what it amounted to in the time and place.

When the town saw him ride in—it would not see him ride out because that would be a pre-dawn sally—the die would be cast as surely as though he'd shouted his intention from the housetops. But did he *have* an intention, other than to drive the worry from a girl's lovely face, to give her something beside work to think about? To save his life he didn't know. Only that he must do it, must see the early sunlight on her soft brown hair, watch the joy of life and youth and racing movement dimpling at her lips' corners. He shook his head and picked up Hank Baker's glance with an urgent one of his own, passed behind the counter into the big back room where all the extra stores were kept.

He grinned self-consciously as he faced the man who was more his friend than anyone in Reading's Flat except the Mountain Man.

'Well?' Hank Baker said at once. 'What's up?'

'Nothing much—and maybe a lot.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. You think, Hank, that maybe you could wheedle your wife into lending me her side-saddle for one day next week?'

'Her *side-saddle*!' Baker said, utterly astonished.

'Yes. Tell her I'll bring her the nicest mess of quail she ever cooked, Hank. And ask her not to mention the bargain to any of the other women.'

'H'm'm,' the merchant said, beginning to smile, 'this sounds serious. And who's a-goin' to ride in that saddle, Price, if a man might ask?'

'Now just who you suppose? What young lady has recently come to Reading's Flat—and who works too dam' hard to feed these bullies the best cooking in California, without any pleasant thing to kind of break the drudgery?'

'Well, I'll be damned!' Hank Baker said. 'Price Malloy! Old Price Malloy, who wouldn't get himself a nice young squaw! Who didn't have time for women, ever! Who just ate his own beans an' ash-cakes! I'll be——'

'Never mind,' Price said, 'do you ask the Missus about that saddle, or do I have to *make* one?'

'Keep yore shirt on. Of course I'll ask her—an' Annie'll be glad to lend it. But she'll hold you to them quail, an' don't forget it.'

'I won't. And I'll want the saddle where I can lay hands on it by four o'clock next Thursday morning without waking up the whole she-bang around here, too.'

Baker grinned again.

'A nocturnal sortie, I take it,' he drawled.

'But a perfectly respectable one,' Malloy said coldly, 'and don't *you* forget that.'

THE LIGHT ON RAINBOW WALL

THURSDAY morning was one of those rare spaces in time when the world seems to stand still, holding its universal breath, waiting for the birth of a perfect day. The cool stillness of autumn lay over the ranges, the shadowy valleys between them, the stars were so large and bright in the dark sky as to make a man wonder, just to look up at them. Price Malloy, riding Cochise and leading the little brown filly, stopped on the rim of Rainbow Wall and looked all over the vast and lonely world around him. The valley itself still lay dark and mysterious beneath him, the great hills were only darker shadows against the dark and starlit sky, but to the man it was a world pulsing softly with hidden life.

A new world, a rich world, a beautiful one, free as man's dreams of freedom, and it was any man's—all men's—for the taking. He smiled a little under the brim of his pushed-back hat and finally started on down the trail toward Reading's Flat. As he entered the town behind the Baker Store the smile turned to a grin of amusement at the thought of what he was doing. He, Price Malloy, sneaking in where he had always gone boldly, his boots striking hard on the planked steps, the adzed-off floor of the big room. He could hear the noise of men in the big room now, for Reading's Flat never closed. Farther north at the Silver Star there was the rhythmic stamp of heavy feet, the blatant sound of the hurdy-gurdy, maudlin voices roaring out the strains of 'Oh, Susanna!'

The wide street was choked with wagons in from the Sacramento Valley with their loads of supplies, with strings of pack-mules tied to long sapling hitch-rails, and piles of boxes, their contents waiting for the hungry hordes who overran the gulches

and the lonely slopes. It was a strange sign of the times that merchandise as precious as the gold they sought, namely food and implements and clothing, could wait intended for the coming day, but so it was, for the swift justice of the diggings had no mercy on a thief. That matter had been so well proven in the several years of the gold rush that no one tempted it.

On the high platform behind the store Price found Annie Baker's good saddle leaned against the wall. He took it soundlessly and put it on the filly, smoothing the thick wool blanket gently into place. He wondered a bit just what the filly would think of so one-sided an affair and the skirts that would go with it. But she was, as he had said, a gentle creature and he would be at her bit to help her understand.

Skirting the main way again he passed out of the town and headed for the Powers cabin, behind whose oiled-muslin-covered window a dim light showed.

At the first sound of the horses' hoofs on the beaten ground of the yard the door opened and Lacey stood in it. The light from the two candles made a sort of halo around her soft brown hair and the man felt his heart leap. This was something. A new something. Something already firmly set in his life and which he had not asked for, had not wanted. As Hank Baker had said, he'd had no time for women. Now he seemed to have vast time and to spare along that line.

'Morning, Lacey,' he said quietly. 'You ready?'

'Ready and waiting, Price,' she said as softly. 'Didn't I say I would be?'

'You sure did,—but I mind my ma and my twin sisters.' He grinned a bit, remembering. 'And that's not a reassuring thought. Ready with them usually meant a good half-hour late.'

'It don't with me.'

'Good. Now if you'll get me a piece of cloth—a blanket or—one of your skirts—I'll just try it out on this little lady. She's sweet and gentle, but she's never carried a lady before.'

The girl turned back in the house and came out presently with one of her full dresses.

'Hold Cochise a minute,' Price said and stepped up on the filly. He leaned both ways, turned her out across the yard, hung

the garment down along her side, brushed it along her flank, and finally swung it in under her slim young belly, all of which the little mare took patiently.

He patted her neck as he dismounted.

'Sweet as honey,' he said proudly.

Lacey put the dress inside the door, closed it and came back to stand beside him. With his hand on the bridle the man put down his other one, cupped her left foot and tossed her lightly up into the saddle.

He watched her intently as she settled herself, gathered up the reins and knew instantly that she could ride. He led the filly across the yard, felt for any tremor in her, and, satisfied, turned her loose. He stepped up on Cochise and they turned right across the flat, headed out toward where the long ridge ended, dwindled down to the level. He meant to go around it and enter Rainbow Valley from the south. It was a longer way than up and over, but only so could he show this girl the miracle of sunrise on the Wall. And it seemed important that he show her, share with her the thing that never ceased to wonder and amaze him.

The Rockface. The monstrous, sheer precipice dropping from the rim-rock straight down to the valley's floor, bright with its prehistoric painting of primordial cataclysm, eternal in its grandeur as the mother earth from which it sprang. Shrouded now in pre-dawn twilight, it waited for the sunrise to light its ancient fires.

And so, for the first time since he had left his homeland half across a world, the man on the big black stallion rode in toward his domain with a woman beside him. He glanced at her from time to time, savouring her beauty, her poise and calmness, her quiet joy in this adventure under the paling stars. For it was adventure to her, he knew full well, just as it was to him, this newness, this something breathless in the soft, cool morning air, this being alone together in a world uncounted ages old, yet young as they both were young. He smiled to himself and did not know it.

'Like it, Lacey?' he asked as they circled in around the dropping end of the ridge and turned north into the deeper darkness of the valley.

'Yes. Oh, yes!' she answered. 'I feel as if—as if something is about to happen. Something beautiful and wonderful.'

'It is,' Price said soberly, and somehow it seemed the words meant more than they said, as if they reached away from the present and into a not-so-distant future. 'What you will see in another half-hour you will never forget, I promise you that. To me, it is a never-ending miracle, something over and above the head of man, a constant reminder of all human insignificance. Kind of keeps a fellow cut down to size, if I make myself clear.'

'You do,' the girl said, 'and I know what you mean. I felt it myself when we crossed the Rockies, like ants crawling on a cathedral column.'

As they entered the valley at its widest and passed up along the level floor the darkness deepened around them, although at the east above the saw-toothed ridge the sky was paling fast. The stars in that direction had vanished. Toward the west they still stood out on the velvet dark of stellar space, whose blackness was turning to royal blue.

The girl was looking up and her profile in the dimness was pearly white, cut like a cameo upon the valley's dusk. The man looked at her and a tide of portent surged in him, a heady sense of mystery and excitement. Half-way up the four-mile length of the floor they turned to the right and rode toward the eastern edge. At a spot where the ages-old erosion had raised a small plateau all along the hills' feet, Price halted and turned them both to face the west.

'Now,' he said, 'we'll just sit here and wait for the miracle. It will be worth waiting for, I promise you.'

And it was.

By common consent they fell silent, as if no speech were needed here nor wanted, as indeed it was not. There was little sound about them. Only the far chuckle and whisper of the living stream which bisected the valley, the high, clear, scattered calls of birds waking in the willows along its banks. There was no wind, and the autumn coolness of more open places was tempered to a gentle warmth. The light came faster now, just a general brightening of the tall dome of sky, the appearance of the high horizon above and around them. The pointed spires

of pine trees on the lifted edges of the world began to show dimly.

'Watch,' Malloy said softly. 'Watch the rim-rock, Lacey.'

Behind them the sun cast a dim glow upward in the east, and out of the western dusk a line of light drew itself slowly along the rim-rock as if with some supernatural and monstrous paintbrush. At first it was only *light*. Then as the sun came up over the ridge and its level rays shot out across the valley, colour burned along the line. Pale golden yellow, like a candle's middle gleam, seemed to hang suspended in the dawn-blue space. Then below it something else emerged. This was another line, and it was green as young willows in the spring, which blended downward into purple, into pink rich as sea-coral, into blazing red—and darker red—and purple dark magenta—and into gold so bright it looked like gold itself.

The sun's rays struck and slanted swiftly down the rockface, and all the ancient fires of long past cataclysms blazed and burned in majesty too great to be described. The great brush strokes of shining colour swept along the Wall horizontally from the south, dropping beautifully at the north to form a perfect rainbow, caught and frozen in eternal beauty at the cooling of some vast and prehistoric upheaval from the new earth's deepest furnace.

There were no words to picture the spectacle. Only the soul itself could grasp it. Only the heart could hold it. Neither tongue nor pen could ever give it forth again.

The two young people beholding it were silent. Price Malloy in the spiritual humbleness which it always produced in him; Lovelace Powers in an awe too deep for words.

But like all too-lovely things it was short-lived. As the sun rose, taking with it the levelness of its rays, the unbelievable brilliance lessened, dimmed, departed, and presently Rainbow Wall was only a beautifully coloured and decorated precipice, dropping from the sky to the valley's floor.

And when the miracle was done the girl turned her face and looked at the man who had shared it with her. She was pale with emotion and her brown eyes were enormous.

'You're right,' she said unsteadily. 'We have been in The

Presence. We are cut down to size, but we have been enhanced ten thousand fold.'

Price reached and took her hand and it was trembling.

'I knew you'd understand, that you'd see it as I see it, an experience beyond the common,' he said, 'an eternal promise, sort of.'

For a long time they sat and watched the light come down the rockface and spread along the valley's floor, still lush with grass, dry and succulent and golden brown, even though Malloy's stock had grazed upon it most of the summer. They saw the willows winding with the little stream turn from black shadows into a fringe of green and gold, for fall had already laid its touch on them. Here and there a cottonwood stood like a tall, yellow torch, and a few maples bore shades of russet red, while some live-oaks, never changing their dusky green from year's end to year's end, marched along the hills' skirts at the east.

'It's beautiful, Price,' the girl said softly. 'A little lost Paradise, here between its ramparts. No wonder you love it.'

Price gathered his rein and led down off the gentle slope, turning toward the north where his buildings stood in a dusky huddle in their little grove. The mares and the younglings dotted the floor out toward where the valley narrowed with the converging ridges, and his herd of cattle grazed farther over at the west.

A new peace lay upon him, a contentment which he had not known before; and pride rose in him at this showing of his domain to the young woman at his side. They crossed the little stream at a shallow, pebbled ford and turned north again toward the buildings and the corrals.

'Did you make all of this yourself?' she asked. 'The cabin, the barns, the corrals?'

'Sure, I made them,' Price said, grinning. 'Who else would?'

'How long have you been here?'

'Two years just about now.'

'You have done well,' she said gravely, 'and you are settled. You have known well what you wanted and gone after it. You mean to live out your life here, don't you?'

'Maybe. Maybe not. Think a man should see more of this world

than just one place. But here I mean to make a seat, a home, one spot where I can always come and know that it belongs to me.'

'That's something which has puzzled me, Price,' Lacey said, considering, 'in this new country. How can a person be sure that any piece of land is his? What are the property rights?'

Instantly the man sobered.

'That is a puzzling matter,' he said, 'to everyone. There is a vast question of Squatter Sovereignty stirring up the Sacramento Valley where General Sutter has his fort. He is a rich man, outside of the gold found at his sawmill in the low Sierras, with great holdings and the finest cattle in California. He looks to the future, too, when gold will have given out—at least in the lavishness of its finding now—and he has built himself a domain. He is a good man. Without the rescue parties which he has sent out from time to time many settlers would have perished. Those who came too late over the Divide and got caught by early snows in the mountains. And yet these very people have, in some instances, settled on his lands despite all he could do to stop them. They say he is being robbed right and left by the Squatters. Squatters' Rights seem sane and sensible to me, since there is as yet no homestead law, and a man's intentions and his work should count in ownership. We're all squatters in a way. It is only when a man squats on land already claimed and improved by another that the act becomes aggression. That's what has happened to Sutter. They say the waggoners have taken his water-holes and fenced his range already; that they have cut his trees and even butchered some of his steers.'

'How dreadful!' the girl said sharply. 'Why don't he fight?'

'He's peaceable,' Malloy answered, 'and stands against violence. They say he's written the Government at Washington for help, but so far nothing has been done.'

'I'd fight if it was my land,' Lacey said with spirit.

'So would I. But a man's handicapped when there are many against him. And there are many squatters, many. They say they're coming in to the Great Valley in hordes. And Sutter's lands are good. Broad and level and covered with forage. He sends his beef by barge down the river and across the bay to San Francisco, where it brings him good money—and there are

the hides-and-tallow boats always in harbour, always eager for trade. That is what I aim to do next year. By then I should have a right pretty herd of prime steers. Whoa, fellas!

He sat up sharply in his saddle as Cochise stopped suddenly and flung up his head. The big dark eyes in the stallion's intelligent face were widely open, his nostrils flaring, questing the still morning air. The man pulled his hat down low above his own eyes, which were narrowed into slits for distant, pin-point vision, and slowly scanned the world around. He looked up along the dropping slope at the east, back the way they had come, and all up along the hills' edges to the buildings and beyond. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, but it was characteristic of his understanding of the superb animal beneath him that he did not urge him forward nor discount his sudden alertness. There was, somewhere near enough for Cochise to catch its presence, something alien to the time and place. For a long, long time the horse stood stone-still, looking, listening, questing the air with those spread nostrils. Then presently he moved forward, stiff-legged on his shining black hoofs, not quite convinced that all was well.

'What is it, Price?' Lacey asked anxiously.

'I don't know, but there is something around. Maybe a panther, maybe a couple of wolves. Could be a bear. Horses can smell them a mile when the wind is right.'

'But there isn't any wind!'

'Not that we can feel—but there's enough for him.'

They rode forward across a little flat where the creek made a bend and came out again not far from the corrals, and Price was a little way ahead, when it happened. There was a *splat* of something swift and hard striking a yielding surface, followed by the thin, high crack of a rifle, and Cochise screamed. His hind legs gave beneath him, buckling backward at the hocks, his loins dropped. Slowly his forelegs crumpled, his great head sagged and he went down to roll on his side and lie quivering on the ground.

The man was down with him, on his knees, lifting the handsome muzzle where the breath fluttered with a sighing sound, and his face was deathly white.

'Damn! Damn! Damn!' he was saying helplessly.

For a long, long moment the stallion lay and quivered.

Then he tried to shake his head, struggled and rolled up on his brisket. And Lacey Powers spoke thickly, as if her throat constricted.

'Look!' she said. 'Across his back!'

Price Malloy sat back on his heels and looked to where her trembling finger pointed, and there it was. Behind the saddle, a little below the peak of the rump, a long deep channel ran straight as a die from side to side, bright with the blood that was beginning to spill along it.

'By——' he began to swear, shut his mouth and tried again.

'Creased,' he said, 'but at the wrong end. Just missed his spine!'

'How do you know?' the girl said, whimpering. 'How can you be sure it missed?'

'Because he rolled up,' Price said shortly, 'otherwise he couldn't have moved.'

For a little while the animal lay where the shock of the stroke had left him. Then, with the magnificent strength of his great body, the courage of his heart, he struck out with his forefeet, heaved his withers and got up. He shook himself, winced at the pull of the hurt muscles across his rump, and stood squarely on his shod hoofs. He raised his head and once more looked all around at the silent world of Rainbow Valley. Price Malloy watched him with narrow eyes that were ice cold. His lips were a thin white line in his whiter face.

Presently he looked up at the girl on the little filly whose own face was as white.

'Lacey,' he said carefully, 'our pleasant day is done. I'll have to get him home and stop his bleeding. It's not too bad, but it needs cold water, lots of it. Will you——'

But Lacey spoke, as carefully, and as if from a great distance, her voice low and stricken. She leaned toward him from her saddle.

'Price,' she said, 'that shot was meant for one of us—but why? Who?'

. 'I don't know,' he said, 'for sure.'

'For sure? Do you even *think* you know?'

'Maybe.'

'Have you—enemies? Anyone who'd wish to—to kill you, Price?'

'I didn't have,' the man said with a touch of bitterness, 'but it seems I have now. Let's get on. Will you go back to town and take the saddle to Mrs. Baker? Go around behind the store—their house is just behind it—and tell her we thank her—and I'll be in a little later. Tie the mare at the hitch-rail there. I'll get her later. And Lacey, Miss,' he added on a gentler note, 'don't be afraid. Nothing will happen to you. Just ride back the way we came.'

'So—you—have now—enemies,' the girl said slowly. 'Since when?'

'For—some time now, perhaps. But do as I tell you, Lacey. Pay it no mind. It's man stuff, between men. Not for a woman to think about.'

'Maybe it is,' she said, still in that slow voice. 'Would—would—would—it go back to—to the day the Reed train came to Reading's Flat, Price? Did you—know anything about—a man with a knife cut in his arm?'

Price looked at her swiftly.

'Maybe I did, Lacey,' he said, 'and I think you've hit it. You're thinking of those two advance scouts, aren't you?'

'Yes. And I don't like the thought. They're both bad. They made trouble in the train. And oh, Price, be careful! Please be careful!'

There were tears on her cheeks, they hung beaded on her long brown lashes, and her lips trembled. Price stepped close to her horse and took her right hand in both of his. It trembled, too, exceedingly. He held it tightly for a moment, then raised it, turned it over and kissed its palm.

'Go home,' he said, 'and stay there. I'll see you again.'

7

LACEY FINDS A FRIEND

AT the house behind the Baker Store Lacey Powers looked at the woman who opened the door to her.

'Mrs. Baker,' she said, 'I am Lovelace Powers and I've come to bring back your saddle, and to thank you for it. Mr. Malloy said he will see you this afternoon. He couldn't come himself—'

Annie Baker scanned the young face before her and knew instantly that here was something wrong.

'And just why,' she asked, 'couldn't that young scapegrace come along?'

'Because,' the girl said distressedly, 'something happened to Cochise.'

'To Cochise? Come in here, child.'

She held the door wider and Lacey stepped into the plain but comfortable room beyond it. Annie pushed a chair toward her.

'Set down,' she said, 'an' tell me.'

'Maybe I shouldn't, Mrs. Baker,' Lacey said. 'Maybe he'd rather tell it himself.'

'Twon't make a mite of difference who tells it, Miss. It'll be known by nightfall all over town an' out along th' gulches. News travels fast around here. What happened to Cochise?'

'Someone shot him.'

'My good Lord! Shot him? Shot Cochise—th' greatest horse this side th' Rockies? That'll just kill Price Malloy an' no mistake!'

'He's not dead—Cochise, I mean. The bullet cut across his rump, but he was bleeding pretty badly and Mr. Malloy had to get him home and try to stop it. So I came back. We'd gone to see the sunrise on Rainbow Wall.'

'Well, that's a blessing,' Annie said, relieved. 'Just so he ain't dead. But I'd hate to be th' man that did it. Price'll even that score if it takes ten years, he's that set on th' big black stud.'

'I know.'

'He know who did it?'

Lacey shook her head.

'We hadn't seen a soul. We'd just watched the light come on the Wall and when it was past its best we started to ride up and see his place when the shot came. It was—was awful.'

'I bet it was at that.' An' you're pretty much shook up. You ~~just~~ set there while I brew us a good hot cup of tea. Won't take a minute, an' you need it.'

'That's very kind of you, Mrs. Baker,' the girl said gratefully, 'and I do need it. Thank you.'

She leaned back in the hand-made rocking chair and knew how much she did need it, not because of the memory of the gallant creature sinking so pitifully to his knees and rolling down as if in death, but because of what the shot itself implied, of what might lie behind it. She found, too, that she needed the hearty kindness in Annie Baker's face, the comfort of her understanding voice, when she presently returned with a pot of fragrant brew and two precious china cups and saucers.

'Ain't nothing like a right hot cup of tea to set a body up,' she said, 'after a shock of any kind. You drink this now an' you'll feel a whole lot better.'

'I feel better right now,' Lacey said with a little rush, 'just to listen to you, Mrs. Baker. You're like a bulwark—kind of like a Rock of Ages—if you know what I mean.'

'Course I know what you mean,' Annie said with large complacency. 'I been thät more than once in my life. I've leaned against a few others, too. There's times in th' average life when folks have got to be one an' do th' other, an' both are right an' fitting in their time an' place. Now let's forget this morning an' talk a bit, just woman to woman. You like your new job of bein' a one-woman bakery for these hairy apes of ruffians who, I hear, are just maudlin over your stuff?'

'Yes, I do, very much. I knew I'd have a business out here in the new country if I could get started—and your husband gave

me starting prices on supplies, which helped. Seems like people help each other a lot out here.'

'They have to,' Annie said grimly, 'if they expect help themselves. And there's times when we all need help, every last mother's son of us. All pioneers do. It's th' way new places start.'

'Yes, ma'am,' said Lacey.

So she drank her fragrant tea and with it a spiritual draught, for she found a grateful comfort in the understanding of this wise and kindly woman, and when she rose to go she held out her hand.

'I'm glad Mr. Malloy sent me here, Mrs. Baker,' she said, '~~and~~
I hope we'll be neighbours.'

'We're that already, girl,' the woman answered.

At home, Jabed Powers looked up from the task of making a new plank bench, and straightened in astonishment.

'Why, Lacey!' he said wonderingly. 'What's the matter? How come you're alone and on foot?'

Standing in the bare yard of the new cabin, Lacey told him of the happening in Rainbow Valley and Jabed slowly laid down his hammer. The gravity of his face, perpetual these days, deepened into the hidden fear which his daughter had come to dread with such bewilderment.

'Don't look so, Pa!' she said distressedly. 'It's not as if it was me got hit. And even the horse will be all right. Price said so.'

'No,' said Jabed, whispering, 'it wasn't you. But it could be—it was meant for—'

'Yes, I know,' the girl said with a tight compression of her lips. 'I think its got to do with Judd Pond and Sylvester Spink. I think they mean to scare him good for whatever happened to Judd that first day in Reading's Flat—for Price knows about it. I asked him and he as good as said so.'

'Scare!' said Jabed. 'Scare! My God!'

He wet his lips and stooped to pick up the hammer, and his hand shook so that he dropped it. He let it lie, and straightening up, looked at her with a strange, sick desperation.

'That Malloy's a nice-like feller, Lacey,' he said, 'but if you'll think a little you'll not go out with him again.'

'Not go out with him? But why? I like to ride with him. And maybe he'll be safer if I do.'

'He won't. He wasn't safe with you along to-day, was he?'
'No,' said Lacey slowly. 'He wasn't.'

'Then—if you value him—stay away from him.'

'You talk in riddles, Pa,' the girl said sharply. 'I had nothing to do with what happened to Judd Pond that day—'

'No, but you've got something to do with Sylvester Spink. Th' man's in love with you—an' he—he's no by-ordinary man. He's a devil.'

'In love with me!' she said furiously. 'Well, he'd better not be! I dislike him from the ground up, and he knows it. I wouldn't let him touch me for a million dollars in gold!'

'Mebbe not. But he'll see you don't let any other man touch you, either.'

Lacey looked at him with widening eyes.

'I? Me?' she said, shaking her head. 'You mean Syl Spink is jealous of me? That he'd *kill* someone because of—of me?'

But Jabed had already said more than he had intended. Jabed who was so tight-mouthing these days, so bound by some inward fear.

And from that moment the girl began to think, to consider Sylvester Spink from all angles in the light of her past knowledge of him. She remembered him beside her cooking fire all along the latter part of the Crossing, his heavy figure squatted on its heels, his eyes following her whenever she chanced to glance his way, his silences, his cruelties among the stock, his changed and oily tones when he spoke to her. She'd known, of course, that he favoured her, but that there was in him the dread thing of passion and jealousy which Jabed's words portrayed she had not known.

She could not, because she knew so little of men in the abstract.

Late that afternoon, Price Malloy, mounted on a tall bay gelding and leading the filly, rode into her dooryard. At sight of him, still a little way off, Jabed went around back and busied himself with some trifling work. Lacey met him at the steps, her eyes troubled.

'How's Cochise?' she asked at once.

'He'll be all right. Nothing serious. Got the blood stopped before he'd lost much. Nothing like real cold water for that—unless, of course, it's an artery of size. This was a superficial cut—but it will leave him scarred as long as he lives.'

There was a hard sound in the man's voice, as if his only thought in the matter was for the superb animal and not himself, as indeed it was.

'I'm glad,' the girl said relievedly, though the trouble did not leave her eyes, fixed on his beneath her drawn brows. She was acutely conscious of the palm of her right hand, as if she could still feel the warm, firm touch of the lips smiling down at her now in reassurance which she could not share. Embarrassment, caused by Jabed's words, was in her, too, putting a diffidence upon her. But Malloy smiled, crossed his hands on his pommel and leaned down a bit toward her.

'You're fretting,' he said softly. 'Stop it, Lacey. Things like this are every-day affairs in the West—in any new country. Men get mad at each other and throw their weight around. Some with fists, some with guns. Some with bluff—and a few with real intent. I think this was bluff, a hit-back, sort of. No one in his right mind would deliberately shoot another for no good reason. Not here, in Reading's Flat. We've got justice here. There's Judge Hiram Macky, and a finer never sat a bench. He's not afraid to impose sentence, once a jury's found a man guilty. There've been three hangings on a certain tree out east of town since I've been here—and since, there's been no need for such. Juries in Reading's Flat are quick and positive—very positive. So don't you fret your pretty head, honey. You know you're pretty, don't you? Pretty—and sweet—and good. I like you, Lacey Miss,' he finished whimsically, 'I like you a lot.'

He gave her no time to answer, but straightened in his saddle, gathered up his reins. As he turned to ride away something in the moment caught desperately at the girl's heart, something urgent and of such import that she caught her breath and put a hand against her throat. It seemed she could not let him go like this, that she must say something, answer that small avowal of liking, hold him back for just another second.

When he was forty feet away she found her voice.

'Price!' she called. 'Price! I—I like you, too.'

The man turned in his saddle and smiled back at her.

'I mean you to,' he said profoundly. 'I think I always have.'

Then he touched the gelding with a heel and left in a long, high lope, and Lacey watched him go with the first real trouble which her young life had known so far. Her mother's passing, yes, and her father's apathy which followed—these had been cause for sorrow and for worry, but here and now a deep and unknown fear closed down upon her heart.

All women before her who had settled in a virgin land had ~~felt~~ that gripping fear to see their men ride off, across a plain to some far fringe of new frontier, into a forest where danger lurked behind each tree, even to their new-tilled fields. Lacey Powers felt it now—and this was her man. As surely as though by bell and book, this was her man, and she was weak with dread to see him ride away to Rainbow Valley and what might be lurking there. Silently within herself she said her first prayer for his safety and turned back inside the house. Filled with a mounting anger she sought out Jabed at his piffling work bchind the cabin.

'Since when, Pa,' she said thinly, 'have you taken to hiding from folks who think enough of us to come to see us? I'm surprised at you.'

Jabed looked at her with his tragic eyes and swallowed so that his thin grey beard worked along his throat.

'I don't mean to be ungracious, Lacey,' he said, 'but—but—I must keep out of it.'

He dropped his glance and the girl's face flushed.

'For Heaven's sake, keep out of *what?*' she said. 'It seems to me you're acting pretty funny. I don't understand you.'

Jabed shook his head.

'No,' he said, half whispering, 'you don't. You couldn't. I only ask you, Lacey, to not think hard of me. Can't you *believe* in me, daughter?'

'I don't know, Pa,' she said distressedly, 'you never acted like this before. You've always been so good and kind, so just and understanding.'

The old man sighed and fiddled aimlessly with a splinter of wood which he'd picked up.

'You've never failed me in my life,' she went on, 'and it hurts me to see you act so strange. Like maybe I've done something wrong. I haven't, Pa.'

'My God!' said Jabed hollowly. 'Of course you haven't, girl. That's farthest from my thoughts. An' I'm tryin' not to fail you now—only I don't know how.'

Lacey threw up a hand in a resigned gesture; shook her brown head.

'It's beyond me,' she said slowly. 'It's all beyond me. But if that Syl Spink comes around this house again I'll know how to deal with *him*, you mark my words.'

'Don't!' said Jabed sharply. 'Be careful what you say to Syl, Lacey. Don't anger him.'

'Anger him?' the girl said furiously. 'I'll *kill* him, maybe.'

But Jabed turned away and walked unsteadily out along the road toward the south where the flat rose to a fringe of young pine trees. He had to be alone.

And that night Sylvester Spink came back to Reading's Flat. The two men, their clothing soiled and worn by their weeks on slope and ridge and river bar, unshaven, but full of life, came into the Silver Star Saloon at dusk. Judd Pond's arm had healed its wound, but there was a weakness in it which caused him to swear with anger at every lift of rock or heavy tool, and he had, somehow, become sullen. With his partner it was just the opposite. Sylvester Spink was arrogant to the point of affront among the crowd. He carried gold in a buckskin poke, small nuggets and heavy dust, and he flung it about high-handedly. He bought liquor and tossed it down his throat, tilting his chin until his new beard, vigorous and auburn-red, spiked toward the ceiling. He wiped his lips with a dirty hand and laughed louder than any in the room.

'This here gold diggin',' he opined largely, 'ain't nothin' to it. W'y, any feller with plain horse sense can go out an' find it. We found plenty—all we need fer a while—an' we found more'n gold. There's a bunch of Injuns settled in up along Stuart's Fork—friendly enough—an' some of th' squaws're lookers. Unwillin', though. Can a man figger that? In an Injun?'

A man farther along the bar set down his whisky glass with an audible thump.

'Mister,' he said clearly, 'I can. That's Chief Blackbuck's village—an' one of them squaws is mine. If them women're unwillin' ain't no man goin' to force 'em—not while I'm around. Just how far you mean what you said?'

He came down along the bar until he stood before Spink. He was a tall man, heavy and broad, with the look of power in every line of his big body, and his black eyes were cold as stellar space.

Sylvester took one keen, appraising look at him and laughed again.

'Not too far,' he said placatingly. 'Jest said unwillin', didn't I?'

'All right. Then jest see to it that they stay that way if they want to. An' I'd advise you to stay clear of Blackbuck's camp.'

'Free country, ain't it?' Spink said with a return of the insolence always so near the surface in him.

'Sure is,' the big man said evenly, 'an' th' freest are th' Indians seein' they was here first.'

'No harm meant,' Spink said subsiding again. There was a tone in the other's voice which rang a bell of caution in him, arrogant though he was habitually. He turned back to the bar and began drinking in earnest, as if, from the weeks away from liquor, he was consumed by thirst.

Always behind, beside him was Judd Pond, silent, contained, a mysterious sort of man, of a somewhat better brand of mind and character than Spink, though with a weak strain which seemed to bolster itself vicariously on the other's boldness, his brute strength. They drank themselves to the important stage, then sat in a game of poker going on interminably at a large round table in the corner, its players changing as this and that one dropped out, cleaned of his gold, to be replaced by others. Anyone was free to take a vacant chair, any man's pinch of 'dust' was welcome in the pile, provided it was adequately measured. By the end of an hour both men had shaken out the last golden grains from their buckskin pokes and by that act were forced to leave the game. The fact of loss did not improve Spink's disposition and in passing down the long room under the swinging kerosene lamps he once more came in contact with the big man with the cold black eyes. Swaying on his ragged

boots, his hands in his hip pockets, Spink stopped and stared at him, trying to focus his eyes on the other's bearded face.

'Oh, yes,' he said finally with a staid, judicial air, 'th' squaw man. Takes 'em himself but denies th' next feller. Well, Mister—'

He got no farther in what he was about to say for the other slapped him across the face with the back of his hand so hard that Spink sat down abruptly and slid a little in the mixture of sawdust and tobacco juice which covered the floor. The other wiped his hand on his buckskinned thigh and turned contemptuously away.

It was after midnight when Lacey Powers wakened suddenly at the pounding on the front door of the cabin which shook that barred, substantial member. Wide-eyed in the dark she listened in mounting fear. As the sounds increased in volume she rose quickly, put on her dress and felt for the candle on the table, the block of lucifers beside it. Jabed came hurriedly from the other room.

The girl struck the light and called loudly.

'Who's there? And what's wanted of us?'

'It's me,' a thick voice answered, 'an' what you spose's wanted? Grub, that's what.'

They recognized Sylvester Spink with varying emotions, the girl with rage that flushed her face, the old man with fear that whitened his.

'You drunken fool!' Lacey Powers cried furiously. 'Get away from that door! You'll get no food here, neither now or any time!'

'Oh, no?' Spink drawled. 'Well, I guess I will—an' now. You open up if you know what's good fer you.'

Shaking on his thin legs, Jabed went toward the door.

'Sho, now, Syl,' he said, 'don't fret yourself. Jest wait a minute.'

'Pa!' Lacey screamed. 'Don't touch that bar! He's drtunk! You don't know what he'll do!'

But Jabed did not listen. As he laid his hand on the bar to lift it from its socket the girl leaped like a cat to the back wall of the room where Jabed's rifle hung on its two pegs. She snatched it down and stood beside the stove with the stock against her shoulder, her finger on the trigger. It was so the two men saw her as they stumbled in across the sill of the opened door.

A MAN WITH A CONSCIENCE

THEY stood gaping at her in a sort of stupid wonder. With an almost physical revulsion Lacey saw Spink's opened mouth like a hole in the few red beard, his small eyes, red and watery from the drink in him.

For a long moment no one spoke. Then the man shut that hanging mouth and straightened up against the door frame. A silly grin came on his face.

'Sho, now, Lace,' he said, swaying, putting out a hand in a vague gesture. 'Sho, now, you lay down that there gun. I ain't a-meanin' nothin'.'

'You're dead right you're not!' she said harshly, 'and you're not doing anything, either, or getting anything. You get out of this house or, by Heaven! I'll kill you.'

It was the first time in her life she had ever sworn and now she meant it completely. She knew that she would kill this unclean man if he made one move toward Jabez or herself. And, sobering fast, Sylvester knew it, too. He licked his thick red lips.

'We're hungry, Lace,' he said placatingly. 'We jest want somethin' to eat. Lay down that gun an' fix us a bit. Please, Lace.'

The old light was coming into his eyes with the dying of the drink, the flame of passion for this one woman of all the women he had ever known, and it burned red like that in the eyes of an animal in the dark. Lacey saw it and a tremor of revulsion shook down her spine with a premonition of dark evil which she did not know or understand.

'I will not lay it down and I'll get you nothing to eat. Get out of here fast, Sylvester Spink!'

He did not move and Lacey laid her cheek along the rifle's stock.

With a flash of the truest knowledge of danger he had ever experienced, Sylvester Spink jumped back through the open door, knocking Pond back with him. Out of the line of fire he stood in the darkness for a silent moment. Then he spoke and the thickness was gone from his voice.

'Jabed,' he snapped. 'You come out here.'

'No!' cried Lacey. 'No, Pa!'

But moving like a bird toward a snake, helplessly, without volition, the old man went toward the door and out. He reached back and drew it shut behind him. In the silence that fell about the empty place the girl stood where the turmoil had left her, the rifle lowered and hanging in her hands, slow tears building in her eyes.

'Oh, Pa,' she whispered half aloud. 'Oh, Pa, what is it? What hold's he got on you—that vile, repulsive creature!'

The men had left the building to be in the clear and she could not hear the low words which passed between them, strain her ears as she might, and when after a little while Jabed came back he walked with the weight of half a life in added years. He looked at her with his hollow eyes, his fingers fiddling with the buttons of his shirt.

'Lacey,' he said, 'they'll be here for breakfast—'

'No!' she cried violently. 'Have you lost your senses, Pa? I'll not cook for them! I'll not have them in this house!'

'Then,' said Jabed tonelessly, 'give me th' gun.'

He held out his hand which trembled exceedingly and the girl looked at it in horror.

'What you mean?' she said. 'What—you're going to do? You can't go kill him now—the moment's passed. It was here—when he threatened us—but it's gone now. It would be murder now—and Reading's Flat hangs murderers—.'

'Not him,' Jabed Powers said, 'an'—yes—I know. That's why—why—' He did not finish and the girl, beset on all sides by dire and sinister things which she did not understand, sat down beside the table, laid her face on its scrubbed surface and began to cry.

She still held the gun across her lap.

With a sigh so deep it was audible above her sobs, Jabad turned and went to bed.

And Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond did come to breakfast.

Cleaned and shaved and sober they came to the cabin and entered without knocking. There was about them no belligerence, only a calm assurance, as if, having settled a matter with the master of the house they went by the outcome, regardless of the woman. And Lacey, looking at her father's face, set before the three men a hearty meal of fried salt pork and pancakes. She had laid no plate for herself and went about the business of the little house in a silence so deep it was almost tangible. Spink watched her covertly and there was a new hardness on his heavy features, as if, sure in his plans and intent, he could afford to hold his peace for a while. When they had finished he rose with a scraping of his chair on the rough floor, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and spoke to Jabad, though his eyes were on Lacey's straight young back.

'We're a-goin' back to our claim on Piper Gulch,' he said loudly, 'an' when we come back we'll have more gold than you can shake a stick at. Mean to have me a cabin, too, mebbe bigger'n this one, an' fixin's up from Yerba Buena. They say there's chairs down there that come from France with right rich coverin' on 'em. Velvet an' fringe to match. Reckon any woman's be tickled to have such.'

No one spoke and he picked up his hat from the floor beside the table and put it on with a jerk.

'I'll be lookin' for better manners, too,' he said meaningly and went out the door.

Stephen Reed was still in some effect the captain of the group of settlers whom he had piloted across the Plains. People turned to him for his staid and quiet wisdom, his clear vision. He was a good man with a conscience, and sometimes a conscience can be a burden to its owner. It was to him and had been for some months now, ever since, in fact, that sorry day when they had carried Ben Hyland back from the bank of that little stream and buried him in the middle of the Great Trace.

Ben Hyland, a fine man cut down in the prime of life by a murderer's bullet—and the murderer going free, unknown, unguessed at. That fact lay heavy on Captain Stephen's mind. For that it was murder and no accident he knew, as everyone in the settlement knew, because of the *two* shots in his body. There had been, and still was, much speculation about the matter. And there had been three men out on the plains that day. But also there were known to be unseen lurkers in the scrub along those lonely miles. Small bands of Indians often paralleled the trains, picking off any stragglers who might be in search of strayed stock, or hunters always after game to feed the hungry mouths. But in no one's mind was there anything like certainty. Sylvester Spink was a hot-head, a sullen man, and Judd Pond was his silent shadow, but to the public mind, neither stood to profit by Hyland's death. And there had been Jabed Powers. Good, quiet Jabed Powers, whom everyone liked and respected. He would not profit, either. However, in both cases there was a fourth figure to be considered, however slightly, for it was a known fact that Ben Hyland was in love with her. Respectfully, deeply, and hopefully, for he took no pains to hide it, he loved Lacey Powers.

Did Jabed disapprove of him? Not likely. Did he fear to lose his cook and only child? That was not natural, either. And what of Sylvester Spink? He had been always at the Powers' fire, but everyone knew he boarded there. So Captain Stephen had thought the matter over for all the weeks between, and one day he had a talk with Judge Hiram Macky, who was another man with a conscience. He told the few details with exactitude and waited anxiously for the other's comment.

'You say none of these men from the train stood to profit in any way?' Judge Macky asked.

'No, not more than the rest. We drew for Ben's belongings, since there was no one to notify, according to Ben's own word when he joined up, and that was a straight matter of chance.'

'I see. And had there been any sign of Indians in the offing?'

'Not just at that particular time, though we had lost a couple of saddle horses the week before. Never saw the redskins. Just heard the hullabaloo when they drove off the stock.'

'So from that you knew they were about.'

'Yes.'

'Have you taken particular note of your own people since? The way they act? Does anyone behave any different from usual?'

'Well——' Captain Stephen hesitated and a small shadow of distress passed across his face.

'Yes, Judge Macky, I have. And there has been a—a change, sort of, in one of these three men, though I hate to mention it.'

'So? Which?'

'The old man, Jabez Powers. He has failed a lot of late weeks.'

The judge thought a while, tapping his blunt fingers on the plank of his table top.

'Old men fail,' he said presently, 'it's not too much of a sign.'

'No. And he seemed to like Ben Hyland, was real friendly with him.'

'These others. They young men, this Spink and Pond?'

'Not too young. 'Round thirty, both of them, I'd say. But Spink's got a dreadful temper. Flies off at nothing.'

The Judge thought a while in silence. Then he spoke again.

'There seems to be no *motive* here. So I'd say, snap judgment, Indians—and they don't need one. The double shot looks vicious, too, as if whoever pulled the trigger took a grim satisfaction in it.'

'That's what's troubled me, sir,' the Captain said, 'it's kept me sleepless nights. In a way I am—I was—the law for my train and it was my responsibility to see fair play for all my people. We made a fine crossing, in peace and well-being. That is, for the most part. The only trouble we ever had—and that was just small squabbings—was caused by Spink. He is a quarrelsome man, always ready to pick a fight.'

'Now I think of it,' Judge Macky said, 'wasn't he the one who tangled with Price Malloy here in town the day you folks landed?'

'Yes, he was. Seems he laid hands on Malloy's black stud, and when he told him to get away from it Sylvester let his temper fly and there was a fight.'

'I see. And about the dead man. Any trouble between him and this Spink?'

'Not that I ever heard of—and you hear everything in a wagon train.'

'Any women involved?'

'No. Yes—there was—in a way, too. It was a known fact that poor Ben Hyland was deep in love with Lovelace Powers.'

'Powers? The old man's daughter?' 'Yes,' said Reed.

'And Spink or Pond?'

'Pond's a lone wolf except for his friendship with Spink—and Spink's too wild for any woman.'

'He have anything to do with the Powers's?'

'Boarded at their fire. Both men did.'

The Judge spread his hands flat on the table top.

'If I were you,' he said, 'I'd look to the younger man. Never know what's hidden under a man's skin. Spink might have wanted the girl, too. And she's enough to make any man want her.'

He smiled with a crinkling of his mild blue eyes.

'I'm one of her devotees myself on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Any young woman who can please the human palate with such succulent cookery and look the way she does in doing so—well—I'd say she was a pretty fair motive, myself.'

'She's a fine, upstanding woman, Lacey,' Captain Reed said gravely, 'and you've cleared my thinking a lot, Judge Macky. You'll likely hear from me again—for I don't mean to let the matter of Ben Hyland drop. If he was murdered—and he surely was I think—and if his murderer is here among us, big as life, unpunished for that grievous wrong—then I mean to keep on looking for him. And if I ever find him, sir, and can bring proof to bear, you'll have a case in court as surely as I stand here to-day. It is my bounden duty.'

'Not wholly, Mr. Reed,' the Judge said kindly. 'While you were entrained, yes, with leadership voted to you at the start and the authority which accompanies such voting, but now that you're disbanded, no. You have no real duty to set yourself such a hard and probably dangerous task.'

'Yes, sir, I have. I still have,' the other said quietly, 'the duty of the able living to the helpless dead. The matter's on my conscience, and must be laid, if it's within my power to do so. I'll not find peace until I bring the murderer to justice, if possible.'

Fall drew on in the country of the Trinities. Toward the west those ~~is~~ mable peaks and saw-tooth ridges took on the flaming colours of the first high frost. Maples shone like golden torches here and there along the slopes and wild grape vines draped the trees on lower ground with dripping scarlet lace. Deer and bear were fat with acorns, the former stepping up the *tempo* of their lives because the rutting season fired their free, wild blood, the latter lazing toward the long sleep of the coming winter. The little streams that chuckled down the great hills' breasts were thin with waters after the long, dry summer.

And Price Malloy was making ready to drive a band of forty prime young steers out to the valley of the Sacramento and down to Red Bluff for the barges and the *Jack Hays* which would take them to the ravenous markets of San Francisco on the great bay. These constituted nearly half his herd, leaving the cows and this year's calves for the winter hold-over.

They would be plenty, too, he told himself, for the amount of hay in the two big stacks so carefully built and fenced at the head of Rainbow Valley, near the long thatched shelter sheds. That hay land, fenced and cut at prime, was more precious to him than the precarious gold of the lonely hills and gulches. It would be here and feeding cattle long after the hectic flood of the Rush was over, to his way of thinking.

The wound on Cochise's rump was healing fast, though he would be marked for ever by it. It lay straight as a die across the shining satin of his hide a bit below the peak of the rump, and though it was no longer raw it was still red—and every time Malloy looked at it a hot and heavy anger welled in him. It had taken a dead crack shot to place it there and miss himself and the girl who had ridden just a length behind him, and though he knew a good many men who could have done it, there were none among them who would have done so, of that he was sure. He had had no enemies. Maybe now he had. Yes, dam' right he had! He saw again the road by Baker's store, felt the fury of the fight he'd had there, the strangling grip of an arm around his throat. He'd admitted as much to Lacey Powers, and he admitted it to himself, had done so subconsciously ever since, though he'd paid it little attention—until that shot. With the

hurt to the black stallion the knowledge had crystallized and become a core of anger in him. Some day he'd know and there would be a reckoning, he told himself. He was not one to turn the other cheek. You fought back on the Frontier, hit hard and quick at any harm, or you left the country. It was no place for weaklings.

So a strange thing began to happen in the life of Reading's Flat.♦

This was a watchfulness strange to the time and place which set itself up in three men and led, like a web of drawn threads, to one man, who was not conscious of it. The three were Captain Reed and Price Malloy and the big man of the bar in the Silver Star Saloon, whose name was Amos Awn, and all three had a reason. In Captain Reed it was the memory of Ben Hyland swinging limply between his bearers. In Malloy it was the anger when he looked at the black stud's blemished hide. In Amos Awn it was the camp on Stuart's Fork and a woman of Blackbuck's band whose temples were banded with blue-black hair, whose rounded breasts were soft as down for a man's head.

The life in Reading's Flat was a hectic, moving thing. It flowed in and out of the one main road between the clustered buildings, and it was never the same. Men from all the world composed it and none stayed in it long. Long enough, maybe, to get new shoes set on a burro or two, to fill grub-packs at the Hank Baker Store, to select carefully tools for the new trade which few of them knew, and to pour on out to the slopes and gulches and river bars along the Trinity toward the west.

Those who did stay for a few days, a week perhaps, were the lucky ones, the finders, and they were the roysterers, playing the dirty tables at the Silver Star, drinking at the long bar, flinging away the gold for which they had done such monstrous toil.

· 'More where that come from,' they opined largely, 'an' what's it fer but to spend?'

They spent it on drink and on the dance hall girls whose eyes were too bright, whose laughter was too brittle, too ready,

Minna and Trixie and Lilly Ann. Minna was tall and dark and none so young, and she was hard to her foundations. Also she was smart, for her take at the Hurdy Gurdy went down each week with the Wells, Fargo shipment to the city by the bay, and it was more than sizeable. The two others were not so smart, but both were prettier, and they spent much of their money on rich, flamboyant clothes which came in often from the *Jack Hays*. Lilly Ann wore a string of nuggets around her little neck which grew heavier and longer always as this and that admirer brought her in some fancier lump of gold, its surface marked by the erosion of the centuries along the deep bed-rock. Someone would bore a hole in it and she could string it on the narrow buckskin thong. Already the necklace hung to her slender waist, a dully gleaming fortune.

And cheek-by-jowl with all this madness of a wild frontier, there was a sane and sober element. There were Bibles in Reading's Flat and those who read them, who lived simply and uprightly by their gentle precepts—Annie Baker and Jim Hartnell's wife, and a few others—and they taught their children to recognize the thin, thin thread which separated right from wrong. That was a ticklish job in the time and place, for the new West set up standards of its own whose interpretation was sometimes fantastic, to say the least.

So the soft fall days went by and Lacey Powers' business was getting almost too much for her to handle, both as to work and wealth and several other things. She had had six proposals of marriage, ranging from two soiled prospectors to Henry Bilder who owned the Silver Star Saloon. All of them had been open and above-board, in the presence of their fellows, for no one had access to the cabin, and she had turned them off with a charming mixture of appreciation and disbelief. If her colour heightened and her brown eyes laughed a little more none could blame her. After all, a woman's prime objective is a man of her own.

'Ain't you ever intendin' to marry any of us, Lacey Miss?' they asked her wistfully. 'Don't you like us?'

'Of course I like you,' she said honestly, 'all of you.'
'Then why'nt you pick someone?'

The girl looked around her and answered that in a gentler voice.

'My Pa,' she said, 'is old and sick. He needs me.'

Silence had followed that, with nodding heads here and there, and her stock took another rise.

And then a voice cut clear above the crowd gathered at the long board counter.

'That's right, Lacey Miss!' it said in shocked relief. 'Don't you go to marryin' up with anybody—for then you'd stop a-makin' these here crullers! An' nothin' could be a bigger blow to Reading's Flat than that!'

Roars of laughter greeted the sally and every man-jack agreed with it.

'You just stay single,' someone called, 'an' belong to all of us. You don't need any man. You got a town full of 'em. We're all in love with you!'

9

AN ANCIENT COVENANT

BUT if that state of affairs were true it was confined almost wholly to the male population. As the women of the wagon train had felt the menace of the girl's beauty, so did those of Reading's Flat. Especially did Susie Hartnell look upon her with jaundiced eyes.

And look upon her she did, more than once. Becoming acquainted with the new families was a common procedure of all the Western settlements, and it was not long before the Flat knew the occupants of the new cabins at the south—the Reeds, the Smiths, the Reverend Tannys and all the rest—and little Susie found it convenient to visit Adam Dunlavy's wife, Hepsibah, quite often and strangely always on Tuesdays and Saturdays.

The lively eyes under her sunbonnet missed nothing that went on in the Powers yard, neither the huge amounts of baked food whose aroma scented the air deliciously, nor the large crowd of men, most of them single, who bought it over the plank counter and ate it ravenously on the spot.

'You'd think,' the girl told herself sharply, 'that some of them'd get themselves their own women, have their *own bread*.'

She did not miss anything about Lacey Powers, either. Not the beauty of her flushed face under the brown hair, nor the quickness and grace of her hands as she picked up and handed out, nor the yellow crock on the counter's end into which a steady stream of pinched 'bits' poured as the eager customers paid. But look as she might Susie Hartnell never stopped to meet the only other girl of her age and station in the place.

And the day she saw Price Malloy ride down and dismount,

to leave Cochise rein-tied to the ground on the crowd's outskirts, while he shouldered his way to the counter, set a paleness under her fair skin which brought the freckles across her little nose into high relief, contracted the pupils of her eyes to pin-points. She walked a little faster down along the broad, dust-deep road toward the cabins, and stepped hurriedly aside out of the path of two running horses which came toward her, their riders high in their stirrups, their beards flying, yelling as they neared the town.

'Gold!' they hollered. 'Gold! Hit it rich, we did! Th' Silver Star! We'll drink her dry to-night! WHOOP-EEeee!'

As they neared the crowd at the town's edge one of them drew a gun and fired it off, sky-high and barking like a banshee. It was only the expression of that wild excitement which meant gold and all its ramifications, passing as they swept by, but it had a strange effect.

The black stud, standing so quietly where he had been left, flung up his head and dropped his loins as if again he felt the searing fire, the monstrous stroke, which had felled him that day in Rainbow Valley.

Cochise the sane, the quiet, the dependable, screamed at that memory and was gone, out across the valley's floor toward the east. With the third leap he stepped on his dragging rein and almost fell as his head snapped down, then recovered as the rein broke. Blood from his bruised jaw blew back on the wind as he ran with all the speed and power in him.

Price Malloy threw down the doughnut he had just lifted to his mouth and jumped through the crowd. At its eastern edge he stopped, drew a deep breath and put his fingers in his mouth. At the high, shrill, piercing whistle which cut the still air the watchers saw a fine thing happen. The stallion, running in panic, head and tail and back one level line, stumbled in his stride, slowed, humped his body in an arc, and with his forefeet ploughing the dry earth into a cloud of dust, came to a dead stop. Watching, Price waited a moment, then whistled twice again, that sharp, compelling sound, and Cochise raised his head, turned in his tracks and came slowly back across the flat. The man met him far out and laid a hand on his forehead between the flaring eyes.

A fury as great as the stallion's fear was in his own eyes. His lips were a thin white line. He did not come back to the crowd and the counter but walked away with his hand on the sweating black neck, toward the ridge and the lifting trail to home.

The men stood watching, the food forgotten for a little while. Then someone spoke.

'Funny,' he said, 'that ain't like Cochise. He's got more sense than a lot of fellers I could mention. An' he's heard gun-shots all his life, I take it. Now what could make him act that-a-way?'

'That there cut ain't healed on his rump yet,' another said. 'You heard of that, I s'pose?'

'Yeah. Well-yeah. An' he ain't forgot! Spiled, I'd say. Spiled, good an' proper.'

'I'd not be so sure,' a third man said, considering. 'He remembers, that's certain, but he remembers something else that's stronger.'

'What's that?'

'His training and what he thinks of his master. Took more than horse sense to stop that speed and turn and come back. It took devotion.'

'Yeah—yes, I guess it did. Price is sure friends with him an' th' horse knows it.'

Lovelace Powers, watching the spectacular incident, felt the sting of tears behind her eyes, a gripping sorrow around her heart, and why she did not know. Perhaps it was the memory of that day in Rainbow Valley. Perhaps it was a premonition of something dark and sinister whose shadows seemed to gather in the future which had been so bright a little while ago. And perhaps it was as well she could not see too far ahead into that future. Silently the men dispersed and the girl as silently gathered up her hand-made trays, brushed off her counter.

And Susie Hartnell went on toward the Dunlavy cabin with an odd bitterness under her tongue. She had caught the look on Lacey Powers' face as she watched Price Malloy tramp off across the Flat beside Cochise, and she had read it clearly and correctly. Of all the men at Reading's Flat, why must it be Price Malloy who brought it there? And why must she, herself, feel this deep, hard hatred for them both? Hate? No, she didn't

hate Price. She could never hate this man. But another girl was another matter. She could, and did, hate Lovelace Powers that instant, and she knew she would always do so. She moistened her full pink lips, drew the strings of her bonnet tight under her small chin and went decorously to visit with Hepsibah, and no one would have known the turmoil that was in her from her face when she arrived, so bland was it, so pretty-sweet.

Jabed Powers was a sick man. Sick in spirit and sick in body, if one could judge by the expression of his hollow eyes, the wasting of his flesh. His worn and faded garments hung on his tall frame loose as a scarecrow's rags, and he had fallen into a habit of silence hard for his daughter to bear.

'Pa,' Lacey told him anxiously, 'I do wish you'd go and see that Doctor Prindle in the town. Maybe he could fix you up a tonic. You don't eat enough to keep a bird alive.'

But the old man shook his head.

'Ain't no tonic going to fix me, Lacey,' he said tonelessly. 'I'm all right. Don't you worry so much.'

But she did worry and her sharp young mind went over everything that had happened in the last half-year which might have made the change in him. Clearly she saw the start, the eager hope of the first part of the Crossing—and always she came to a stop about midway when Jabed had begun to decline, a spot—midway—when they had brought Ben Hyland to the silent camp, swinging in his blanket. Over and over again she saw these things and a cold hand seemed tightening on her heart the more she thought of them. What had Ben's death had to do with her Pa? Her good, kind Pa, who had borne so much sorrow already in the loss of his beloved wife. To save her life she could not figure it out, nor the strange, determined backing which he gave Sylvester Spink. Spink, the last man in the world her father could like or approve of. Thinking back to that night when Spink had called him from the cabin that cold hand closed down still more. What grip, then, if it was not friendship, did Sylvester have on Jabed? For grip it was she was beginning to know. How else could Jabed, knowing her deep dislike of Spink, so constantly try to force her to accept, approve of him?

And there was that look of fear in his face whenever Sylvester was present, that cringing acquiescence to everything the arrogant bully proposed. Yes, she told herself, her father was afraid of Spink and Spink knew it and gloried in it, in his power to dictate to him and, through him, to her.

Stirring her batter for to-morrow's crullers she struck her big spoon violently on the bowl's edge in the sudden anger which flooded her.

'He'll never tell *me* what to do!' she said aloud, and did not know how soon she would eat those words in the deep bitterness of defeat.

The men of the disbanded train had for the most part joined the prospectors in the mad search for gold, but none of them had found a miracle like the Reverend Tanny. Some came in at week's end with sizeable pokes of free gold, the tiny nuggets washed from the river bars, the small streams' edges, but no one made enough to warrant sticking to it indefinitely.

'If a man's single, yes,' someone opined, 'but for a family it ain't steady enough.'

'Well, what else's there fer a man in this here wilderness?' someone else asked anxiously. 'Ain't enough work to justify, and as fer th' land, that's too far off fer profit. Family's got to eat till there's a crop. Of course, there's meat a-plenty for th' man will hunt, but he's got to buy flour and such to go with it.'

'That's right. I've got it figured this way. Hunt this winter two days a week, dig th' rest of th' time, and when spring comes take up a likely piece of land and make a crop of corn. They say this land'll grow anything a man puts in with a little work to fence an' cultivate. Price Malloy over in his Rainbow Valley made a fine crop last year. Enough to feed stock. Say he's drivin' beef soon over to th' Sacramento. All I'd want, first year, would be enough for meal to feed ourselves an' th' team an' cow. I figger I've got a good balance in my plans.'

'Have so,' the rest agreed soberly, 'and we'd do well to do the same. Looks like a likely way to make a start.'

'Th' land,' Tom Smith said eagerly, 'that's the future and no mistake. But I've been makin' inquiry round about and it seems there's a great muddle as to titles. All of California lies in old

grants, Spanish mostly, but given out by so many forms of government and even private ownership, that a man don't know where he stands. They say th' City of Sacramento itself is in a hullabaloo an' turmoil over Squatters' Rights. Been killings, even, in th' m.tter. Quite a few of them. Men that bought in good faith find themselves challenged fer title an' others just takin' over, provided they can bluff enough. Seems like when they can't bluff they shoot. Feller with a pack train of supplies fer Mr. Baker was talkin' about it in th' Silver Star last night. Said there'd been two hangin's, too, in th' matter and several pitched battles. Land in th' Great Valley's more valuable, of course, than these out-lyin' places because of th' big river itself. Sometime that place'll be full settled and known of th' world, you mark my words.'

'Captain Sutter's in trouble, they do say,' Adam Dunlavy said, 'what with the folks he's helped squatting right on his doorstep, claiming the very choicest of his acres.'

'Yes,' Reverend Tanny said. 'He's sent petitions to Washington, but so far no notice has been taken of them or him. It don't seem right.'

'But th' Captain's got a lot of land,' someone else spoke up, 'too much for one man to hold.'

'That may be true, but he's far-sighted and charitable. Looks to the future and to great and final settlement. Seems he'd gladly help the settlers—has done so often—but he does resent theft of his best fields.'

'Well, it's a big country. Should be room for everyone.'

'Should be—and is. But not all the land is *good*. Good land is what every settler wants, must have.'

'That's so. An' no one man should hog it.'

'Not even if he's bought and paid for it?'

'Well—even so, suppose he can't prove title, like them in Sacramento? Then what? Still let him have it?'

'I say yes,' put in Dunlavy, 'a man buys in good faith he should be allowed his rights.'

'An' what about th' rights of them that can't buy? Th' poor folks? Th' squatters?'

'There's still a whole new world of land lying without title.

Let them take it up, homestead it some day when we get a homestead law.'

'Sure, that's right, provided it's good land. No man should have to take up poor stuff an' work his heart out on it, I say. I say share th' good land, piece an' piece alike, so much to every family.'

'That's reasonable, Adam,' someone said.

'Sure it's reasonable,' Dunlavy answered, 'provided it's not been bought and paid for. I still say a man should have his good-faith rights.' 'Well, there's rights an' rights,' the malcontent replied.

Hank Baker gave a dance in the Store one Saturday night. He cleared out the big room of its miscellaneous hodge-podge of supplies which the bulging shelves could not hold, and which were piled on plank counters running down the middle. Two fiddlers and a long-haired fellow with a fine accordion came in with one of the freight wagons and offered their services at a thumping price. Good music was rare in the diggings everywhere and the chance for a real 'hoe-down' was too good to miss. So Hank hired the trio on the spot and sent the word around that on the next night there'd be the biggest dance at his place which Reading's Flat had ever seen, bar none.

Price Malloy, in for a few supplies in a double tied-off sack across Cochise's rump, grinned delightedly and on leaving town rode down to the cabin at the south which was becoming so prominent a factor in his scheme of life. Lacey Powers, a dab of flour on her pretty nose, met him at the door and the man's heart leaped at the shine of pleasure in her eyes.

'Come in,' she said, 'I know what you want. There's a pan of fresh ones and a pot of coffee on the stove.'

'Women!' Price said loftily. 'Don't you think a man has a heart as well as a stomach?'

'Sure we do,' she answered happily, 'and we know the road to it, too. Feed the brute and you can wind him round your finger.'

'So! So that's it, huh?'

He dropped his rein and stepped in across the rough, clean sill. Always the inside of the poor small house gave him a sense

of peace and well-being, as if it typified a goal toward which he had been moving all his adult life and didn't know it. Now he sat down at the well-scrubbed table and watched the girl in her clean and faded dress, her full calico apron, as she set before him the golden crullers, a cup of steaming drink.

'Ha!' he said. 'This is fine. I have news for you, but it will have to wait.'

'News? What news? Good or—or bad?'

Seeing the quick, anxious change on her face, Price hastened to dispel it.

'Good,' he said thickly, his mouth full of cruller, 'very good, and nice and exciting.'

'Price Malloy!' the girl said. 'If you aren't the teasingest man! You tell me right now—or—' She reached and took his plate away.

Price sighed heavily.

'All right, all right,' he said resignedly, 'you grind a man down.'

'Well?'

'Well yourself.'

He leaned forward watching her face for the wimple of pleasure he meant to bring there.

'Just how,' he said, 'would you like to go to a dance tomorrow night? In your best bib-and-tucker—with me?'

The light he'd hoped for broke on her sensitive features like sudden sunlight through a shadow.

'A dance!' she said breathlessly. 'A real dance? Where?'

'At the Store, and Hank Baker says it'll be the biggest one ever held in this country. Everybody in sight and hearing will be there. You like?'

'I like! Oh, yes—yes—I like! It's been more than a year since I've seen a merrymaking, a real one. And I thank you, Price, for asking me. I do so.'

'Who else would I ask?' the man said with evident meaning, and the sweet red colour crept into Lacey's face.

'Well—there are other girls, aren't there? That little Susie Hartnell for one. And—and I heard—the Indians come to things, too.'

'Susie's a nice kid,' Price said soberly, 'but not for me. And as for the brown ladies, some of them are nice also, but I stick to my kind. Will you go with me, Lacey?'

'Yes, yes Price, I'll go and I'm all excited already. I have a good dress, too, so you won't be ashamed of me.'

'If you wore some of your flour sacks, my girl,' the man answered, 'I'd be proud to be your escort. So to-morrow night then, around eight o'clock.'

Hank Baker lived up to his word about that dance. The two big kerosene lamps, hanging under their reflectors from the roof beams, shone redly brilliant through the strips of bright calico which Annie had torn from their priceless bolt on the shelf. Planks laid on up-ended nail kegs furnished seats against the walls, while a platform of the same on barrels lifted the musicians above the heads of the crowd. The long bar was freshly polished, its stores of refreshments waiting on the shelf behind. And every living soul who had heard of the affair and was able to travel was either there or coming when Price Malloy entered with Lovelace Powers on his arm. The girl's face was a playground of emotions, for Jabez Powers had staged a scene at the cabin as they left which hurt and saddened her. Shaking and pale the old man had begged her not to go, at least with this man, and when she had indignantly demanded to know *why*, to have his reasons, he had shaken his head and gone into his small room and shut the door behind him with a strange finality.

Angered at the mysterious injustice of the thing the girl had set her lips and left the house, but there was now a shadow on the night, a sadness beneath the coming gaiety.

'What is it, Price?' she had asked desperately. 'Why does he act so strange?'

'I don't know, Lacey, but' as I told you once we will find out. Now try to forget it and let's enjoy this chance for a little fun. Hear the fiddles, honey?'

'Yes,' said Lacey softly, 'I hear them—but I hear something sweeter—that word "honey". I—I like—to hear you say it, Price.'

In the darkness of the open road half-way between the cabins and the town, the man stopped, turned her toward him and

drew her close against his breast. There was a perfume in her soft hair on his cheek, a yielding warmth in her firm young body, and for the first time in his life Price Mallby knew its meaning.

'I mean it, Lacey,' he said, 'from now on ~~out~~ I mean it. You are that to me, the sweetest, loveliest thing I've ever known. I want you for my very own, now and always. What say, my girl?'

For answer her arms went up around his neck, she lifted her face and the first wonderful kiss of possession and surrender swept them both with wordless ecstasy. They clung together, lost among the stars, drowned in the sweet waters of the greatest joy that mortals know, amazed at its glory. When they finally drew apart the girl was trembling and a long sigh released the breath in her lungs.

'I love you, Lacey Miss,' Price said gently. 'Do you love me? Say it, honey. I want to hear the words.'

'I love you, Price,' she whispered dutifully, 'and I'll be the best wife ever. I'll love you till I die.'

'Amen,' he said. 'It is a covenant.'

'It is a covenant,' she answered.

'Out at my cabin,' he went on, 'there's a little old box, made of hand-carved wood, so old it's shiny dark with the touch of many hands. It was my mother's. She kept her small treasures in it. She wanted me to have it. In it are a few odds and ends which she valued—a cameo brooch, a broken ear-ring, and a little gold ring, her wedding ring. It's thin and delicate for it was her mother's, too. Will you wear it for me, Lacey?'

The girl stopped and put her hands to her face where tears were suddenly damp on her cheeks.

'Yes,' she breathed, 'and oh, I hope I'm worthy of such honour!'

'You're worth the world—to me,' he answered gravely.

He drew a clean red handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her face, lifted it with fingers underneath her little chin, kissed her again and tucking her hand in his elbow, started for the lights and the music.

THE BITTER, DEADLY SHOWDOWN

WHEN Price and Lacey entered the Store the first square set was in full swing. Every soul in Reading's Flat, including Minna, Trixie and Lilly Ann, crowded the big floor and the benches along the wall. On a store-box just inside the door lay a heap of priceless hardware, the guns and belts and holsters of the male participants, grimly guarded by Marshal Pettibone—who wore his own.

'Lay 'em down, boys,' he told all comers, 'this here's a right elegant shindig an' we aim to keep it so. Also, read th' sign up there.'

No one objected, and the heap grew while the boots of its owners made thunder on the thick plank floor. The big sign over the bar said frankly: *Any gent gets drunk goes out—and stays out.*

The musicians were worth their money and the flood of sound they poured out put happiness in hearts long starved for the niceties, set a rhythm into every boot and slipper. Faces flushed, eyes sparkled, wide skirts swished and billowed and laughter was high on every side. If there were pursed lips and wide circling in those quarters where the three gay girls from the Hurdy Gurdy were encountered they went unnoticed for the most part. Matron and maid, Bible reader and prostitute, Indian and white, were one after a fashion that night in that they were human and happy. And soon Price Malloy and Lacey Powers were in the thick of it. Both were good dancers, but the girl was a little better than good. She was grace itself as she swayed and swung, sashayed and bowed, and she was by far the loveliest woman there. True to her word to Price she did have a pretty dress, and she wore it with pride. This was a soft

merino of the colour of young willow leaves in spring, richly livened with sprigs of small pink flowers, its modestly low neck circled by a fine lace collar which lay flat on her young shoulders. A bow of darker green ribbon joined the lace on her breast, held by a good pink cameo which had been her mother's. All this finery had crossed the plains in the little horsehair trunk to which she had clung tenaciously and was her only treasure. She looked like something out of the very fashionable *Godey's Ladies' Book* which set the fashion of the times half-way across a world, and her newly-acquired man looked at her with proud eyes. Of all the people who made up the swirling, happy crowd, this girl was the happiest. Her heart was bursting with it, her lips seemed still to tremble with the ecstasy of her first profound kisses, the thrill of that embrace was warm about her. And she had no secret, for it stood out plain upon her features. Her curved lips, her laughing eyes, the light on her face, all told the old story of love's amazing miracle.

Many a woman read it rightly, some with smiles of sharing joy, others with nostalgic envy, and at least one with cold dismay. This was Susie Hartnell, swinging at the moment in the bend of Malloy's arm. Passing, she had seen the flash of Lacey's eyes to Price's face and she looked up quickly. What she saw there was the end of any hopes which she had cherished for a year and more and the hate she felt for the other girl intensified inside her. Her small face became so pale that the freckles across her nose looked like a dusky veil, her pink lips were ashy. Whatever might be said for Susie's spitefulness, her forthright gaining for herself the things she wanted, there could be no question about the passion which she carried for the tall dark man beside her. In that moment of final revelation she knew a spiritual crucifixion as deeply tragic as the human heart can feel. It swept her like dark waters, and for once the sure young feet in the cross-tied slippers fumbled in the dancing steps.

'Hi, kid,' Price said, looking down at her, 'catch your toe? Hank's floor is none too smooth.'

'Yes,' the girl said dully. 'I caught—my—toe.'

Then she was gone to another partner, her head up, her red curls swinging on her shoulders.

And up at the Silver Star where three bartenders took turns between keeping the place open and shaking a foot at the dance, two men came in from the dark outside. Dirty, unshaven, their pockets sagging, their eyes on the bottles on the shelves that flanked the long mirror, Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond pushed back their hats and leaned avidly against the polished wood.

'Name it, boys,' the barkeep said, 'an' if we ain't got it I'll make it for you.'

Spink grinned and licked his lips.

'Ain't no need,' he said, 'looks like you got it. Dam' me—how thirsty can a man get! Set 'er out, fella! All of it—in relays. I aim t' start on whisky an' go right on down—or up—th' line.'

He reached for the glass that slid toward him and filled it from the bottle which followed. Then he turned in the act of tossing down the fiery drink and looked at the almost empty room. Only a few old-timers sat at the tables playing stud poker.

'Hey!' Spink said, astonished. 'What's th' matter? Where is everybody? W'y—I ain't never seen this place like this before!'

'Never been a reason like this in th' Flat, either,' the tender said, swabbing the spotless bar. 'Ain't you heard? Where you been keepin' yourself?'

'Heard? Hell, heard what?' Spink asked, sharply setting down his glass.

'About th' dance. Th' biggest dam' dance ever held in these here parts. Down at Hank's store. Got music, real music. Fellers come in from th' Valley yesterday. Th' whole town's there. Seemed like you'd a-heard th' noise as you come in.'

Spink stared at the speaker with his mouth open, his small eyes slowly widening with the play of thoughts behind them. Then he picked up his glass and drained it, poured it full, drank again, and finally taking up the bottle put it to his lips and drank heavily. When he set it down and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand it was the barkeep's turn to stare at him.

'By cracky!' he said wonderingly. 'I've seen some fancy drinkers in my time, but you sure do take th' cake!'

'Yeah?' Spink said. 'Any remarks on that there subject?'

'Nope. Was just by way of a compliment, Mister, but if you

want to make something out of it, w'y, you can take it or leave it.'

'I'll leave it. Fer th' time bein'. I'll likely be in here another time.'

'You're welcome. Public place.'

Spink turned and looked at Judd Pond.

'Fancy I got business at that there dance,' he said. 'Let's go.'

But Pond, 't out a hand and stopped him as he turned away.

'How about dividin' up th' take, Syl?' he said. 'As good a time as any, an' I'd like to have my share. Want to spend a bit myself.'

'You in any hurry?'

'No. Just like t' have it, that's all.'

He looked avidly at the soiled buckskin sack which hung from a strap over Spink's shoulder and which carried the bulk of their gold, though every pocket of both men's garments was loaded. The other stared at him with that odd, flaring look which always denoted decision in him.

'Said I'd look after th' take for both of us, didn't I?' he said sharply. 'Put it away at Wells, Fargo in both names, didn't I?'

'Sure, Syl, sure,' Pond said hastily.

'Ain't satisfied with that arrangement?'

'Didn't say I wasn't satisfied,' Pond said with a touch of sullenness in his voice. 'I just want my share, that's all.'

'To give to Minna an' Lilly Ann an' Trixie. You got enough for that an' more. I'll put th' rest away—for both of us—to-morrow.'

He went swiftly toward the door, but already the great jolt of the liquor, gulped after weeks of abstinence, was taking hold of him so that he grazed the door frame going out. Behind him the man who had been his shadow, the echo of his voice, for so many months on end, walked more steadily, his eyes on Spink's back and on the sagging buckskin bag.

There was a look in them which Spink had never seen, a stirring, a fear, a visible embodiment of the sound of sullenness in his recent words.

It was as if a cringing dog looked up with the first faint awakening of challenge to a brutal master. It was short-lived,

passing as it came, a wimple, a wind of protest, stifled immediately with the subservience of long habit, and the two men walked down the saloon steps and headed toward the store. They could hear the sounds of gaiety clearly now. 'Must a-ben between dances when we come in,' Spink said over his shoulder, 'or we'd a-heard it. It's loud enough.'

Pond did not answer and they threaded their way between the carts and wagons, the tie-lines of burros, which jammed and cluttered the one long street. At the open doorway Marshal Pettibone looked at them with an almost articulate disfavour, at their soiled and hard-worn clothes, their unkempt hair and beards.

Swaying, Spink made to enter, pushing by the marshal with his usual arrogance, but the other held him back with a quick grasp on his arm.

'Jest a minute, boys,' he said. 'Lay down your irons. Everyone's doin' it. No guns go in to-night.'

Spink jerked his arm away and paid no attention to the words. His eyes, beginning to shine with the peculiar red light which characterized them in anger, were flashing over the colourful, moving crowd on the floor. They singled out unerringly the girl in the soft green dress, burned on her flushed, laughing face with the sudden, leaping fury of some savage beast. He licked the heavy lips in the unkempt beard and started in across the floor.

But Marshal Pettibone was not in his position without good reason.

A lean, peaceable appearing man, he belied that appearance completely when occasion arose. It arose now with this contemptuous flouting of his words and authority. In one swift motion he reached the strutting man and dropping a hand on his shoulder whirled him around as one might turn a child.

'I said guns down,' he rasped in a thin, clear voice. 'You put it down—now.'

As if he noticed the marshal for the first time Spink looked at him with those flaring eyes. He wavered on his heels a moment.

'Who says so?' he asked, his hand sliding to rest on the butt

of the old revolver dangling on his thigh. 'What son-of-a-bitch says so?'

What more he might have said—or done—with the feel of the gun in his palm was never to be known, for Marshal Pettibone hit him once flat in the face with such speed and power that he crumpled like a rag and settled limply in a heap on the floor.

Pettibone dusted his hands together and wiped them on his pants.

'Take him to th' cooler, boys,' he said, as several deputies, on hand for just such emergencies, stepped forward.

Judd Pond, watching the whole play, stood where he was and made no move to follow. The marshal looked keenly at him, his hawk's face razor keen.

'He your pardner?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Pond, and let it go at that. But suddenly remembering the buckskin bag, dragging the boards as Spink was unceremoniously carried out by arms and legs, he darted forward and went along. Still like the shadow he had been so long he plodded behind the grotesque procession and asked to be let in the jail with Spink.

'He ain't to say bad, boys,' he told the deputies earnestly, 'jest got his hide too full of liquor at the Silver Star before goin' to th' store—an' he ain't been used to it for nigh on to a month. He'll be all right once he's slept it off. I'll just set in there with him, if you don't mind.'

No one minded, since Pond would be one more out of the way for the night, and he was duly locked up in the small, one-room brick building which sturdily flanked all efforts at law and order in Reading's Flat.

They swung Spink down on the rope-and-sapling bunk and left him to enjoy his double oblivion, and Pond sat down on the dirt floor and watched the inert man with a frown between his bushy brows. More than once his glance rested on the bulging bag but he made no move to touch it. What held him back from taking his share of its contents was not apparent, even to himself.

So finally the big night was over, the last note hushed, the

last step trodden, and Reading's Flat drew a sigh of vast satisfaction and went home to bed. At the cabin to the south, Price Malloy and Lovelace Powers stood together in that first bright wonder of requited love and pledged the age-old faiths and constancies and joys that are to every devotee for ever new, for ever peculiar to themselves alone, and did not know that with one flaring glance across a dance room floor a threat as deadly as death itself had loomed before them.

'Honey,' the man was whispering, 'I start before sun-up to-morrow for the Big Valley with my bunch of steers. The drive and river drift will take about two weeks, but when I come back I'll be here pronto—and I'll bring that little thin-worn ring for you. Now kiss me once of your own free will. Up on your toes, Lacey Miss. Arms around my neck.'

For a long and lovely moment they clung together, lost in an ecstasy more poignant than they knew, more precious in that it was to be so short lived. Then Malloy was gone in the late night darkness, the hoofs of Cochise making an eager music all their own, and the girl stood on the log doorstep listening with her face lifted to the stars. So is it given to mortals once in this sorry world to glimpse divinity.

Price caught an hour's sleep and with the first light was on his way with his first offering to life as he saw it in the new country. The small bunch of beef was prime with fat, their haunches square, their ribs well padded. There was forage in plenty along the way and Price meant to slow-drive, so that by the time they reached the barges they would still be prime. He had made all arrangements weeks before and the long slow days would be perfect for the dreams and plans which filled his mind. He had one man with him, an Indian from Chief Black-buck's band, a good rider, dependable and able, and back at Rainbow, Sam Blunt was in charge. He had left things in good shape, food in the cabin, grain for the mares and colts in the big bin, and last but not least, enough of the Silver Star's best to last the old-timer until his return. He could trust the Mountain Man to use it wisely, not to overdo and neglect the stock, and so, taken all-in-all, Price Malloy had reason to feel well satisfied on all and every count. And he did so, to the very foundations

of his being. Slow-riding, hands crossed on his pommel, he gave himself up hour after lazy hour to the dreams which had become so deep, so fully rounded, so full of meaning since the advent of Captain Reed's wagon train so few weeks ago. He marvelled at the changes which so short a time could bring. He had meant to marry, surely, sometime. But that had been—sometime. One look at the face of Lacey Powers and he had known it was *now*, or soon at least. Providing, of course, the girl should feel the same, and he had never doubted that she would.

They made the little town of Redding out on the Big Valley's floor well before noon on that first day and leaving it off to the left, went down along the hills' skirts at the west. The river was over east but he meant to stay away from it as long as possible, since he wanted no stampeding into deep waters, and there were still streams running from the hills which carried water, low though it was so near the end of the bone-dry summer. A strange country this, he thought, with all its waters in the winter months, nothing after. To most of the new people coming in this knowledge brought consternation, but time took care of that, for what with the stored snows in the High Sierras to melt in the long warm days, the water-table over bed-rock, it kept, for the most part, a perfect balance. There were times, of course, when drouth took hold of the world, when the fall rains came too early and failed to follow up, so that the small seeds, sprouting, died on their shallow roots, and though the rains did come later, there were no more seeds to sprout.

In such years the deer died on the barren slopes, of hunger and of thirst, and of the two thirst was the more dreadful. Price had seen the pitiful bones around the dried-up springs, for it had happened the year before he came to Reading's Flat, and he had heard the stories the old-timers told, and they were not pretty things to see and hear.

But the years since had been good years, and he had prepared for all eventualities that he could foresee, and meant to do so always. He thought of the years ahead with the holding under Rainbow Wall growing in grace and beauty and value, with new rooms added to the cabin and furnishings brought up from Yerba Buena to please a woman's heart, and with that woman

singing among the good things of her life. He smiled now and again, pulled his hat lower over his dreaming eyes, and was well satisfied.

They made good progress down the edge of the Great Valley and in due course reached the settlement of Red Bluff. Here they camped on the outskirts, holding the cattle on a little flat, and Malloy bought grain in the town to supplement the forage, well eaten off in this section, and waited two days for the *Jack Hays*. That fussy little side-wheeler, shallow of draught and strongly built, was an important part of the new life of the country, since it was the only boat of its size on the river which could come so far north. The *Senator*, far larger and more pretentious, must stop at Sacramento for those very reasons, drawing too much water for the gradually lessening stream. And so it was that, on a soft blue morning in the deepening fall, Price Malloy, landowner, cattleman of the future, set out on the last leg of his first journey to the new City by the Golden Gate, as Yerba Buena was already being called.

Two flat, well-sided barges, each carrying twenty head of the prime young beef the markets of that roystering settlement were likely to see for a long time, floated quietly behind the *Hays*. Price himself rode with the head barge, Tom Yellow Eye on the other, and it was a pleasant journey. The low banks of the river were green with willow already turning with the gold of first frost, and in the evening fish slapped the mirrored surface. On the second day the boat stopped at Sand Bar Landing long enough to unload and let the thirsty cattle drink in the shallows, then with every head safe back on the barges, it belched its way down the broadening river toward where that important and watery highway entered the narrow inland sea of the Carquines Straits and headed for the town across the Bay. By sundown the whole venture was over and done with, the fat steers sold in a matter of minutes amid furious bidding, and Price Malloy had put into the safe keeping of Wells, Fargo & Co. the first really tidy sum of his life in the new country. He paid Tom Yellow Eye enough to see that worthy through a night amid the wonders of civilization, withheld the rest due him to be paid at a safer time. The *Jack Hays*, loading throughout

the night, would leave on the back trip by dawn, and Price made for the stores of the city in a certain excitement which was both strange and pleasurable. For the first time in his life he meant to buy gifts to give a woman. Gifts for a girl with soft brown hair and eyes that crinkled at the corners when she laughed, lovely gifts to delight her heart. Another ring now, bright with gems, and ear-rings for her little ears. A bracelet for her wrist, and maybe hand-carved combs to hold her curls in place. These would be from the Orient, along with a length of silk to make—yes, to make a wedding gown! These thoughts set a warm joy in his heart, put a smile in his quiet eyes.

And back at Reading's Flat a sinister high tide of evil began to flow unseen across the world. Sylvester Spink came out of jail, sober and cold with a deadly purpose. His first act on coming out of his drunken sleep was to look to the gold in the dirty buckskin bag, to heft in his hand, to measure it against the twisted neck of the container. He did not look at Judd Pond, quietly smoking on the floor across from him, but Pond looked hard at him. No speech passed between them for a while. It was as if some crisis stood between them, some turning point in a road had been reached. Then Spink looked over at the man who had been his shadow for so long and grinned disarmingly.

'Jest thought I'd see how much I flang away,' he said, 'but seems I didn't stay sober long enough.'

Pond did not answer, but tapped out the dottle of his pipe on the heel of his hand and shook it on the dirt of the floor. He rose and put the pipe away and knocked on the iron door with a ringing stroke. This brought the man on guard, who opened the door and peered in at the two men.

'Ye both sober?' this worthy asked pointedly. 'Fer if ye ain't I got orders t' let ye cool till ye a'

'Yes,' Pond said, 'we're sober.'

Spink got up and dusted off his garments.

'Dam' right we're sober,' he said grimly, 'an' you better leave us out of this here rat-trap. You got nothin' to hold us for. Pity a man can't have himself a few drinks in this — town without bein' made a jail-bird! Think I'll take this up with—'

'Ye' marshal' grinned the other. 'I would if I was you—seein's he put ye here. 'Twas him ye flouted at the dance last night.'

Spink didn't answer and the man reluctantly opened the door wide and stepped aside. Spink and Pond went out into the sunlight, blinking a little.

'I'm hungry,' Spink said shortly. 'Let's go eat.'

'Where?' Pond asked.

'Where you s'pose? I ben pretty patient with th' folks in that there cabin. It's time fer th' showdown an' I'm headin' for it. Come along.'

Judd Pond made no move to follow and Spink turned sharply a dozen steps away and looked at him with that flare of the eyes which Pond had come to know so well, and which had held him captive to cold fear for many a long month.

'Sure,' he said. 'Sure, Syl, I'm comin'', and fell in line behind him.

At the clean little house Lacey was deep at work on her baking. This was a business day and she was almost ready for the crowd which would be there by noon. Great heaps of dough-nuts gleamed rich and brown on the scrubbed table, loaves of bread gave off their sweet aroma, when the outer door opened without a knock and Sylvester Spink strode in. He flung his hat in a corner, swung a chair around toward him with an arrogant gesture and sat down astride it, his arms in their dirty sleeves crossed on its back.

'Hello, Lace,' he said.

The girl flushed hotly and did not answer. Her lips set themselves in a hard straight line and her dark eyes narrowed with anger.

'Where's Jabez?' Spink said next.

Lacey flung down her mixing spoon with a gesture characteristic of her when she was very angry.

'Sylvester Spink,' she said, 'how often must I tell you to keep away from me? I don't like you and I'm tired being pestered by your high-handed manners. Pa is out back splitting wood. If you want to see him go out there. I'm busy.'

The man's face hardened. He fished in a pocket for his pipe,

filled and lighted it with a lucifer split fro
the small stick on the clean scrubbed floor wit' trick? I say he
snap of his fingers.

'Not too busy,' he said pointedly, 'to listen when're he
talks.'

He nodded to Pond without looking at him.

'Go get Jabed,' he said. 'This here's th' showdown.'

Judd Pond went silently out the back door and called to the old man on the wood-pile. When Jabed saw who it was he laid his axe down carefully to keep it from falling from his suddenly shaking hands. The old look of anguish was on his face again.

Inside the house, Spink said 'Morning, Jabed.'

'Good morning, Sylvester,' Jabed answered.

He sat down on the stool beside the table and passed a hand across his eyes.

'Well, Syl?' he asked tiredly.

'That's as good a start as any,' Sylvester said shortly. 'Just—let's get at it. I'm through fooling round, Jabed, what with seein' Lace cavortin' at that dance last night with th' feller from over th' ridge, an' I'm stoppin' it right now.'

For the first time Lacey looked directly at him.

'Oh, you are, are you?' she said furiously. 'Well, you're just a mite too late. I'm promised to marry Price Malloy when he gets back from his cattle-drive. So what are you going to do about that?'

There was a prideful lift to her young head, a triumphant set to her shoulders as she reached for a towel and dried her hands.

Slowly Sylvester Spink rose from the chair and threw it suddenly, violently against the farther wall.

'Well—I'll—be—damned!' he said thickly. 'So it's gone that far, has it? Well—it goes no further. You'll be marryin' me, my fine haired spit-fire, an' don't you forget that fact. An' th' sooner th' better.'

His small eyes were red again with that peculiar fiery glow which gave them the look of an animal's, trapped in the dark and waiting for any chance to leap. He looked like an animal, too, and for one second the courageous girl by the table felt a

'Th' marshal,' gr. Then she shook herself, mentally and seein's he put ~~ans~~swered him in a voice as cold as steel.
night.' 'Lesome toad!' she said distinctly. 'I'd rather be
Spir'

wish, yes? Well, that's your own affair. But would you ruther
& Jabed here dead? Hangin' by th' neck from a limb of that
there oak tree out across th' flat from town?'

The fury left the girl's face which slowly paled under the
surge of mystery and fear which poured over her spirit like a
flood.

'What do you mean, Sylvester Spink?' she said slowly. 'Just
what do you mean?'

'Jest what I said. You can take it or leave it.'

Lacey looked at her father, but Jabed had sunk forward with
his face in his hands.

'Pa!' she cried wildly. 'What *is* it? What does he mean?'

But it was Spink who answered, his mouth under the parted
moustache drawn back from his big teeth in a grimace half-way
between a laugh and a snarl.

'I mean,' he rasped, 'that all I got t' do—me an' Judd here—is
go tell Captain Reed what we seen that day by th' little creek
back across th' plains. Th' Cap'n's swore to bring th' man to
justice who killed Ben Hyland—an' Judge Macky's pledged to
~~ad~~ an' abet him in th' matter, so I hear. An' they hang killers,
here in Reading's Flat.'

For the first time the whole dreadful thing was clear to Lacey
Powers.

Now she knew the meaning of her father's decline, the terror
in his eyes, the trembling of his work-worn hands. She looked
at his bowed form now and such a flood of pity poured over
her that her knees shook as she went to stand beside him, her
hand on his thin grey hair.

'He's lying, Pa,' she said unsteadily. 'I know it in my heart.
You never shot Ben.'

'No—Oh, no!' Jabed said in a strangled voice. 'I never did!
I never did! But how can I prove it? How can I?'

'I don't know,' the girl said softly. 'But somehow we will
prove it.'

And now Spink laughed outright.

'Yeah? An' jest how you goin' to do that litt'l trick? I say he did. Judd here says he did, too. We both seen him fite th' shot. We found Ben, too, remember. Went right to him where he laid on th' bank. Two eye-witnesses. Two against one—an' him predg'dist in his own favour. Who you think's agoin' to believe him? Him against us?'

Lacey wet her dry lips and could find no words. For the first time in her life the courage in her was defeated. Jabed, broken at last, hopeless and convinced by Spink's triumphant words, was weeping the hard, slow tears of age when all the fight is over.

For a long, long moment they remained so, locked in a dead silence broken only by Jabed's crying, backed against the wall of destiny with no help on any side. Her quick mind saw the whole dark picture which Spink's words had drawn before her, the accusation out at last, backed by both men before the people of the train, of Reading's Flat, of all the little world around. Two witnesses—and a broken old man who wept. No one who knew the truth—and Captain Reed with his downright sense of duty.

They might not want to believe—the people—but what evidence was their *against* belief? She raised a hand and pushed the brown hair up from her sweating forehead, and slid her right arm down around her father's neck. Like a live, protecting shield she leaned against him.

'Hush—hush, Pa,' she said gently. 'Don't cry so hard. They'll never hang you on any tree at Reading's Flat. I'll kill these two men first, myself.'

'Ain't no need of that,' Spink said loudly. 'I got a better way.'

He waited, grinning, and the girl stared at him as at some slimy reptile. Presently she sighed and rubbed her palm down across her face where lines of undue age had come in a matter of minutes.

'Yes,' she said, whispering. 'I know. You would have.'

'Dam' right I have! You jest marry me, like I said, an' they won't never be no trouble. Ain't no man goin' to turn his pa-in-law over to no marshal—to be hanged. 'Twouldn't be no-wise fittin' in th' family!'

He laughed again and slapped his thigh, stuck his thumbs in his belt and swaggered across the little room and back. He looked at Pond and for some reason his wild face sobered. There was something new on his shadow's weak features, a flitting, alien thing which passed like a drift of smoke and was gone. Sylvester Spink stopped in his tracks and regarded the other intently. He wanted no change in Judd Pond, then or ever, for Pond was his insurance. Now he spoke, suddenly, sharply; like a shot in the stillness of the cabin.

'Let's get out of here,' he said. 'There's drink a-plenty at th' Silver Star and we got th' dust t' buy it. We'll see you—both' he added pointedly to those two against the wall, 'when you've made up your minds for sure.'

He picked up his hat from the corner where it lay, dusted it elaborately on his knee, put it on and left the house with an arrogant slam of the door.

For a long time there was no sound behind the two men. The girl stood as if turned to stone beside her father's chair, her arm still on his shoulder, her eyes blank upon the farther wall. Then with a sigh so deep it was like a sob, she bent, and taking up her apron wiped the old man's face. It was the universal gesture of womanhood, the act of comforting, of strengthening, of resignation.

'Sh'h'h'h, sh'h'h,' she said softly. 'Hush, Pa. Hush, now. It's all right.'

Jabed said dully, 'Now you know, Lacey. You know why I tried to—to make you look kindly on Sylvester Spink—knowin' all the time he was a skunk of the first water! And my own child! My own good girl! But I thought—I thought—'

'Yes, I know. You thought to marry him was not so bad as seeing you dead and done for. And it wouldn't. It won't be.'

In the last three words a mile-stone had been reached, a decision made, though she who spoke them did not rightly know the fact. But Jabed did. He shook his head and raised his thin old body upright.

'No,' he said. 'Don't do it, girl. Let them do their worst—we'll tell the world just what they've done to us—. Don't do it, Lacey, child.'

'They'd not want to believe them, Pa,' she said, 'but law is law and two against one would stand in any court. It would have to stand.'

'That's what I've known and dreaded all these awful months. And the cloud such a—such a thing—would leave on you forever after has just broke my heart.'

'I know. I know now. But it will never happen. I'll not let it happen. Now you come and wash your face and eat something. It's nearly time for business.'

How she got through the day Lovelace Powers never afterward could remember. She could remember only the hour just after dark when Sylvester Spink came back to the house, swaggering, arrogant, sure of himself, to demand her answer. He stood in the middle of the lamp-lit room with his hands in his hip pockets and looked at her with those wild and flaring eyes which always made her think of animals in the dark.

'Well?' he said. 'What's it t'be? Yes or no? Me or that there tree out east of town?'

The girl looked at him as if she'd never seen his face before.

Then she passed her hand across her face and nodded her brown head where the small cutls bobbed at her temples—the temples which Price Malloy had kissed so short a time ago.

'It's yes,' she said dully, 'but I tell you now that some day I shall kill you for it.'

The man licked his lips but made no move to touch her. All that would come later.

'I'll chance it,' he said. 'An' I tell *you*, now that I want no more truck between you an' th' feller from over the Wall. You hear me? If it ain't a clean break he'll get a bullet in his back an' no one'll be the wiser.'

'I know,' the girl said bitterly, 'like Ben Hyland. It will be a clean break—for my Pa's sake—you dirty murderer! And now get out of here! Get it'

11

THE FREE LAND MEN

SAM BLUNT had an accident, appalling and incredible. He broke the jug which held his supply of Henry Bilder's best and on the afternoon of the same day he came into town riding the little brown mare which Price had directed him to use.

'I must be a-slippin', Tim,' he told the bartender earnestly. 'I ain't never done sich a fool thing before in all my life. Jest dropped her, slick as a weasel! She hit a stone no bigger's my fist an' busted plumb t' hell! Ye'll hev t' give me another'n an' charge it up to Price. He'll be a-comin' home in another three-four days.'

Sam pushed his hat back on his grizzled head and turned with an elbow on the bar to survey the room while he waited. He looked back at Tim.

'Mebbe ye better give me a drink right away,' he said. 'Mouth's dry as a shed snake-skin.'

With the glass in hand he sipped appreciatively and grinned toothlessly around at those he knew at table, bar and roulette wheel. Ten feet away he saw Spink and Pond, the former hilariously uproarious, filling and refilling his glass from the bottle before him on an otherwise empty table. At the Mountain Man's mention of Price Malloy he whirled in his chair and looked at him, swaying with the drink he had absorbed steadily in the last hour. Drink was an enemy of Sylvester Spink, loosening an otherwise controlled tongue, investing him with an arrogance far ahead of his usual supply which needed no enhancement, drunk or sober.

Now his small eyes widened on Sam Blunt, his thick lips showed under the moustache.

'Yah!' he said loudly. 'Malloy! Th' feller hits a man jest fer lookin' at his damned horse!'

Sam Blunt set down his glass.

'You was a-sayin', Mister?' he inquired mildly.

'I was sayin' this here Malloy feller is a son-of-a-bitch, an' some day I aim t' make him say it!'

Spink was on his feet by this time and the room had quieted. His face was flushed and had a swollen look, his voice was thick and ugly.

'Well! Well!' Sam said. 'An' jest how, seein's Price floored ye oncen already, do ye aim t' do that same?'

'I got ways,' the thick voice went on, 'an' it ain't with fists, either.'

Sam Blunt suddenly stood erect, old and thin, but wiry as a spring.

'I see,' he said clearly, 'an' that there sounds like a threat. Sounds like ambush. Shots in th' back. Mebby that there bullet streak acrost Cochise's rump was such. I wonder, now. I jest wonder. An' I call this entire crowd to witness—ifn anything like that should happen t' Price we'll know right where t' look.'

Spink left his table and made for Blunt, but Judd Pond grabbed him from behind. He had seen the knife in Sam's palm, held stiffly yet with looseness, too, and he remembered.

'Ease up, Syl,' he said sharply, 'want t' get yourself killed?'

Like most bullies the sight of danger stopped Spink in his tracks.

Beginning to sober suddenly he licked his lips and glanced around at the stilled and watching crowd. Their very silence bore in on him the fact that he had said too much. And he had done so. In the time and place his words had presaged future trouble and every man-jack present recorded them. Shrugging out of Pond's grasp he pulled down his vest, pushed his hat forward from behind and strode unsteadily to the door and out.

Sam Blunt turned back to the bar and lifted his precious jug.

'Never did like ambush,' he said to no one in particular.

At the cabin south of town Lovelace Powers had changed the future tenor of her life. Alone in her bed she had wept the bitter tears of sorrow, dread, defilement and renunciation. To go ahead and keep the promise she had made to Price Malloy meant

such tragedy as she had never dreamed of. She knew Sylvester Spink and she knew Captain Stephen Reed, the one's stern conscience, the other's lack of it. The fact that Captain Reed had never liked Spink, had accused him of making trouble in the train, would not weigh with him in the matter of any accusation Spink might make against her father, if proven and substantiated by a witness.

That Judd Pond was weak and bound to Spink by some mysterious loyalty could not stand against the law which said that two eye-witnesses were more than the accused man's word. So Spink and Pond together, vowing they had seen Jabed Powers kill Ben Hyland, could very conceivably put a noose around the old man's neck. And Jabed, worn and trembling with long endurance of the fear of death and dishonour, would make a sorry witness in his own behalf. So she wept for Jabed and for her own lost dreams and for the unthinkable thing she would have to do to Price Malloy, the man she so desperately loved.

For she could not tell Malloy the truth. To do so would be to bring on, promptly and terribly, a gun fight at the first sight of the two in the open street. Price was a marksman, she knew, but so was Spink. She had seen him shoot in the days of the crossing and the thought of his deadly aim, his quickness, put a band of steel around her heart. It could be that Price would kill him, but the odds were just as long that it would be he who lay in the dust when the fight was over. And the very thought made her beat her hands against her pillow and cry as never in her life she had cried before. Never had she loved any one or any thing as she loved this man, and she would never love again. That she knew as final. And so, to save him, to save them all, she must break his heart and hers.

And she must break her own life into nothingness, into a dark and dreadful horror, for she must marry Sylvester Spink as she had said. The physical revulsion which shook her at the thought was so strong as to leave her weak and trembling. It dried the tears on her cheeks and shut her hands into fists and drew her pale lips hard against her teeth.

It made her into something alien to her gentle nature, for she knew as surely as she lived that some day she would kill the

man who had so ruthlessly changed her life, had robbed her of all that she held dear.

And that man, alternating between gales of triumphant laughter and moods of insane jealousy, was driving his active brain this way and that for a way to remove Price Malloy from his scheme of life. Furious at Sam Blunt for his keen alerting of the men in that room at the Silver Star in case anything happened to Malloy, he knew he had lost his surest weapon, the ambush which the Mountain Man had named. With the known enmity between himself and Price that cowardly and deadly trick was useless. He thought furiously of a populace aroused, a hair-trigger mob of men, most of whom liked the man from Rainbow Wall—and of that hangman's tree over east of the Flat. So he drank and gambled and thought, licked his thick lips and stayed away from Lovelace Powers. With a rare perspicacity he left the girl alone to get herself adjusted. Time enough later to go to her, to press his hard-gained advantage.

And at the next sale-day the crowding customers at the fragrant table in the cabin's yard looked at Lacey Powers with open mouths and wondering eyes. They saw the whiteness of her face, the deep, dark rings beneath her usually laughing eyes, the desperate anguish of those eyes themselves.

'My God!' someone said unhappily. 'What's th' matter Lacey Miss? You sick?'

Honest and friendly to these hard-bitten but, to her, decent men, the girl looked back at them.

'Yes, gentlemen,' she said, 'I—I think I am. Not in my body. In my heart and soul.'

'By damn! What—is they anything we can do? If so, you jest name it.'

She shook her head and pushed a pan of crullers aimlessly across the boards.

'Name it, Lacey,' another said earnestly. 'Ye need money fer anything?'

'No.'

'Yore Pa? He gettin' worse? Thar's a mighty fine doctor out at Red Bluff they say. Not to say Doe Prindle ain't good, but mebbe somebody with more learnin'—'

'No, said Lacey quietly. 'Pa's no worse.'

'Then tell us. Let us help ye. Come on, girl.'

A pale smile touched her mouth.

'I thank you,' she told them straightly, 'for I know you are my friends—but no one can help me. I've got to—to help myself. How you like the bread to-day? I put a mite more sugar in the dough this time.'

But sugar in the dough was to no avail and when the crowd dispersed it was in a strained and quiet manner, for every man-jack there was more or less devoted to the girl. Out of earshot they broke into groups and talked in wondering voices.

'Funniest thing I ever saw,' a man opined. 'One week she's so full of laughs an' happiness she's about t' bust—an' now this. W'y, jest last week at the dance you'd a-thought she owned the town, riot to say th' whole wide world!'

'Yeah, an' Price Malloy was with her. Ye don't suppose he—'

'No. If I ever saw a man in love it's him. Ol' Price, who wan't ever goin' to get him a woman.'

By nightfall the town was buzzing. The women got it from their men and even the dance-hall girls knew that something was wrong with the young woman of the wagon train. And one woman heard it with a thrill of elation. Little Susie Hartnell, whose blue eyes dropped to hide their light.

'Maybe its Price,' she thought. 'Maybe he's through with her. Oh, Heaven, let it be that! Just let it be!'

Next day Annie Baker went down to see Lovelace Powers.

'Th' town's saying you're in trouble,' she said carefully. 'You like to talk to another woman?'

For the first time in days a smile broke on the girl's face.

'My Heavenly days, Annie Baker!' she said. 'What kind of trouble are you thinking of?'

'Well,' Annie said ingeniously, 'you're a woman, ain't you? And a mighty pretty one at that.'

'Well, it's not that kind of trouble. I just find—I find—I need to rearrange my outlook on life, I guess you'd say. But it's something I don't want to talk about—even to you who are my best friend in this country—except—except—'

'I know. Except Price Malloy.'

'Yes,' Lacey said, 'and oh, Annie, I—I've got to give him up!'

'Got to? Well, of all th' senseless things I ever heard! Don't you know Price Malloy is just about th' finest man in these here parts? An' that he's over his ears in love with you?'

'Of course I know it, Annie,' she said sadly. 'And those are just the reasons why I have to give him up. And Annie—I'm telling you this when I wouldp't tell another living soul.'

'Not even Price?'

'Especially Price. I just want you to know that I love him with all my heart and soul, and because I do I must protect him. Now let's say no more about it.'

Out on the broad waters of the Sacramento Price Malloy leaned on the rail of the *Jack Hays* and dreamed his dreams. There was money in his pockets, some precious parcels in his tiny stateroom, and a golden future lay ahead. To-morrow he would deliver back the empty barges towing behind the *Hays*, get Cochise from the stable where he'd left him in good care, and be on his way up along the western hills' skirts, bound for the holding under Rainbow Wall, which had become so doubly rich in promise since he'd held Lacey Powers in his arms that last magic time. The world was bright before him and he asked no more of life.

And back at Reading's Flat Sylvester Spink was full of a new excitement, for he had had a flash of genius. His small eyes glowed with their strange red fire, he licked his lips often under the parted, thick moustache and he bought himself a full new outfit of clothes from Hank Baker, so that he looked as prosperous as he really was. There was a swagger to his walk in the knee-high boots, fancy stitched and handsome, a more arrogant tilt to the broad felt hat with the silver-studded band.

He was washed and shaved and barbered, and he was, to all outward appearance, a man of consequence. It was so he appeared to those men of the wagon train who stewed and fretted over the future which seemed of late uncertain. Only the Reverend Tanny had really 'struck it rich'. Others among the settlers had found gold, of course. Any man in the time and

place could find it to some extent, but not every prospector was lucky enough to hit a paying pocket, or to find himself a bed of gold along some shallow stream. For the most part these men were not gold-hunters. They were land men, farmers, and somehow they were lost among these mountains. It was that very lostness which had flashed across the hunting mind of Sylvester Spink and changed him overnight; Spink, who went among the settlers now and began to talk.

Memories of the crossing placed him as irresponsible, gabby, given to overbearing temper, a man of little standing among them. But he had been poor then, haggling over wages, suspicious. Now he was rich, for he and Pond were among those favoured by the wild land over better men, and that fact changed his status. When he stood in this cabin yard and that and talked with his new-found confidence, men listened, frowning but intrigued. Some shook their heads and would have none of his scheme, but others said 'Why not?' or 'Just what I ben sayin' myself.' Others asked in anxious interest 'But where'd we get th' money, Syl? Such a thing would take some money an' ain't none of us got it. Not more'n enough t' see us through th' winter.'

'What more'll you have by spring?' Spink wanted to know. 'An' I said I'd go in on every deal, didn't I?—an' wait fer return—with interest—till th' second year crops?'

'Sounds fair,' someone opined, 'more than fair. But how come you're so all-fired generous all of a sudden?'

'I ain't generous,' Spink said flatly, 'nary a bit. I jest don't hanker to break my back a-diggin' gold for ever. An' th' gold won't last for ever, either.'

'That's right. It won't. But when you mean to start? How many families you takin' in?'

'Right soon,' Spink spat out so sharply that his questioner stared, 'and everyone that wants to join my company.'

'Company?'

'That's right. Th' Sylvester J. Spink Farm Land Company. I aim t' be somebody in this here country, come a few years later.'

'But Syl,' an anxious voice asked at the edge of the small

crowd gathered back of Adam Dunlavy's cabin, 'you don't think we're jest goin' in an' take without trouble, do you? Way I see it, the thing means fight any way you look at it.'

'Mebbe,' Spink said. 'Anything worth havin' ever got without it?'

'No.'

'And we'll be quite a crowd,' Spink went on. 'There's force in numbers. Take th' Free Land men over in Sacramento. They fought, didn't they?'

'Some got killed, too. Plenty shootin' in Yerba Buena. Regular war.'

'Sure. But a lot didn't get shot, an' what I hear they're still holdin' on. And Sutter. He holds valid title they say, yet th' Squatters took his best land right out from under his nose. Still on it. No one man's powerful enough to hold on to too much land when they's folks a-starvin' for it. With gold peterin' out in a few years, it's th' land that's goin' t' be th' wealth, and don't any of you fellers forget it.'

'Syl's right,' someone said loudly. 'An' a lot of us been thinkin' the same thing, only we didn't have no way to make it work. With Spink's backin' for grub an' grain, looks like it's made fer us.'

'Then let's get down t' brass tacks, men,' Spink said. 'Let's hold ourselves a regular meetin'—say to-morrow night—an' get organized.'

'Don't look just right to me,' Tom Smith said worriedly. 'Seems too much like plain stealing.'

'You got a fambly, ain't you?' someone said sharply. 'Want to hang fire till all the best valleys are taken up an' ain't nothin' left but mountains?'

Tom shook his head miserably.

'No,' he said. 'Of course not.'

'An' where's th' best land around these parts? Real good land, rich as butter? Jest one place. One big valley. An' we're Free Land men now—or will be, once we have that regular meetin' an' organize.'

'It'll take time——' Smith said, but Spink broke in harshly.

'No,' he said, 'we'll move right soon—an' all at once. Like a tide rollin' in,' he finished grinning, 'yeah—jest like a tide.'

THE SHADOWS FALL ON RAINBOW VALLEY

PRICE MALLOY came home to the log house under the Wall at the end of a soft fall day. Riding up along the level floor, hands crossed on his pommel, the precious things he had bought in San Francisco securely tied in a narrow bundle on Cochise's rump, he smiled at the prospect laid out before him. Far to the north he could see the little bunch of his hold-over cows, their short yearling calves beside them, a darker blot of shadow in the great shadow of the rockface which covered his little world at this late hour. Nearer there were the cottonwoods where his buildings stood, the corrals, the barns, the sheds. There, too, was the living spring so priceless in this summer-dry land. It was a lovely spot, sheltered, remote yet within riding distance of the town, fecund with the promise of a lush and prosperous future, and his heart swelled with pride and joy in its possession. He had worked long and hard and steadily to make it so, had sunk his slender all in it and his faith in it and in that future was boundless. With Lovelace Powers set like a jewel in its frame he would ask nothing more of life.

He would have it all. He pushed his hat back on his head and shifted in his saddle, watching the dim light in the window which said Sam Blunt was on the job. And Sam was on the job. Beside the gate to the corral the Mountain Man stood rock-still, watching the lone rider on the big black stallion come up along the level floor. There was something in his weathered face which no one had ever seen there before, a look of in-held fury underneath stark distress. He held his old pipe in his hand but it was cold, had been cold for an hour—two—three—he did not know how long. And he had had no taste of the new jug

in the cabin since around noon. For the first time in his life he had forgotten the comfort of its fiery contents.

Now as Price Malloy rode up toward him he stepped out to meet him. With the first glance at his eyes above the straggly beard the smile left Price's features as if a hand had wiped it off. He knew instantly that there was something wrong. He reined Cochise in close and looked keenly down at Sam.

'What is it?' he asked tightly. 'What's happened?'

'So much I 'druther take a whippin' than tell ye, Price,' the old man said fiercely. 'I failed ye, that's whut.'

'Not you,' Price said, 'but what? What's up?'

'Th' ain't a mare nor a younglin' alive on this place but Brownie yonder,' he nodded to the barn behind him, 'an' iffen I knowed for sure who done it I'd kill th' son of a bitch this night.'

'My good God!' Price Malloy said. 'You mean—'

'Jest whut I mean. It was 'long about noon yestiddy an' I'd jest made me some bannocks fer dinner an' was 'bout to set when I heered th' shots. Fur off and fast, at th' north end. Th' stock'd been feedin' up there around th' Blue Spring, all fine as could be. They's so much grass up there that they don't care much fer their corn-ears—you know they was that way before you left—'

'I know,' Price said.

'Well, they hadn't come down th' night before an' I'd went out by sun-up on Brownie to check on 'em. All busy an' contented, all grazin' peaceful as you please, so I come on back down here an' was peterin' around th' barn seein' that everything was neat like, all mornin'. I'd been to town two days back—broke my jug an' went in for another—but I swear to you, Price, I'd had no more than my mornin' cup. Not a extry drop. An' as I say it was 'bout mid-sun when I heered th' shots. They was a reg'lar fusillade, like a battle, seemed like. I jumped fer my rifle an' th' little mare an' lit a shuck out fer there—an' whut I found near bruk my heart. I tell yoti so.'

The old man stopped and swallowed, his beard moving with the motion of his scraggy neck.

'They was there, all right,' he went on presently, 'all of 'em,

every last head, th' mares an' the fine young colts—an' all as dead as stone. An' it was fancy shootin', Price. In th' head, every shot, clean^{as} as a hound's tooth. It took a fancy hand with a rifle to do such a job, now I'm tellin' you, an' it was *ambush*. From some^{rs} up on th' slope where th' Wall breaks off an' the trail comes down. An' I got my 'picions. Ain't a man in th' hull of this here country I'd accuse of *ambush* exceptin' one.'

For a long time Price Malloy sat where he was, his hand on his thigh, his hat still on the back of his head where he'd pushed it in sheer exuberance so short a time ago, and his eyes set toward the valley's head where the pitiful tragedy lay. His mares, his younglings, his priceless start toward the best saddle stock in California. Dead and done for, their innocent lives snuffed out because of human hatred. He sat so still for so long that the Mountain Man moved on his moccasined feet, cleared his throat. Slowly, as if he were for the first time weary of his long journey, the man in the saddle swung stiffly down.

'I know,' he said. 'I know what you're thinking, Sam, and I'm thinking the same. There's only one skunk around here low enough to do it—two skunks, maybe. And no way in the world to prove it.'

'Don't need proof,' Sam Blunt said quietly, 'an' a man can pick a fight.'

'That wouldn't be enough, Sam. Man's got to know and let the other fellow know too before retribution is worth a bullet. But I'll find out if its humanly possible. I promised to find out some other things which I've been too busy to attend to, if I remember right. It's time to get started.' And he led Cochise away toward the barn.

Next morning he, too, went to the valley's head and looked at the pitiful sight which lay there, and there was a thin white line of rage around his mouth.

'I've never condoned killing a human being, but if I had the man who did this I'd kill him if I could,' he said.

'Ye can,' Sam Blunt said flatly. 'Ain't nothin' stoppin' ye, as I can see. Jest go to town and do it.'

'I'd have to know,' Price said doggedly.

'Don't ye?' the Mountain Man asked.

'Of course—as near as a man can know without proof. But I stand for the good future of this new country where the law comes first, not any man's vengeance. I'm engaged to be married. I want to raise a family of decent youngsters. You think—if I go down and kill Sylvester Spink right off the bat—that a woman like Lacey Powers is going to marry me fresh out of a fracas like that?'

'Beats me,' Sam said disgustedly.

They left the carcasses where they lay and rode away. They were too many to bury; it was too early to pile brush and burn. Would have to wait for the first soft rains for that or run the risk of starting a forest fire.

And so, though Price Malloy had made good money on his first small beef drive, he had lost more than money with his handsome mares and colts.

He had lost the beginnings of a dream.

A little, little dream, compared to what the future held for him, it was to prove.

That afternoon he went to Reading's Flat and headed for Hank Baker's store. He found the big room full as usual. Many were strangers, the usual stream of gold-mad men which the time and place poured through the settlement, but many were his friends and acquaintances. He went to the bar and turning his back against it called to this and that one to come and have a drink with him. No one refused and presently a long line of men had gathered to him. When each had been served, Price leaned forward so as to see each way and pushed his hat back on his head.

'Boys,' he said distinctly, 'I want to tell you something. I hardly know why I tell you, but seems I just want my friends to know—in case, just in case. You all know I've been breeding a small bunch of mares to Cochise. Got some fine yearlings. Took some pride in the making of a line of saddle stock. Well—yesterday I came home from driving my first steers out to market—left Sam Blunt in charge at Rainbow—and I found the old man floored—and every last head of my fancy stock dead at the valley's north end. Shot—all in the head—by a crack hand with a rifle.'

He stopped, and drained his glass and a shocked silence followed his dramatic statement. Then the voices broke.

'Shot! Great snakes! Why?'

'Whut fer? Who'd wan't to do such a thing to you?'

'Well—I'm damned! Price, you ain't got a enemy in th' world!'

Wide eyes looked down along the bar, shocked faces turned toward him.

'Seems like I have,' Price said.

'You know who?'

'Yes—you got suspicions?'

'I don't know, of course. And yes—I've got suspicions.'

'I be damned! You goin' t' call?'

'I got no proof to call anyone,' Malloy said slowly, 'but if I ever get it I'll call the bastard you may be sure.'

'Call,' someone said loudly, 'an' we'll be behind you to th' last man. Won't we fellers?'

Every hand slapped down on the bar with a roar that stopped the play at the nearest tables for a minute.

'Thanks, boys. I just wanted you to know, like I said—in case.'

He settled his hat back on his head, threw down some money for the drinks and turned away toward the door.

'Where you goin', Price?' someone wanted to know.

'Thought I'd go over to the Silver Star for a minute,' Price said.

Thoughtfully the whole line took its collective foot from the rail and followed. They made quite a procession trudging silently in the dust along the moiling street. Still in a sort of formation they entered the saloon and ranged along the bar again, this time with all their backs against it, their elbows resting on it. Standing so with Malloy they scanned the gambling layouts. Over near the north wall Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond sat at a small table with drinks before them. They were alone and Spink was resplendent in his new finery. On Judd Pond's face there was a tracey of new lines, come there in the last few weeks, a seeming of discontent and sullenness. He moved his glass back and forth across the small space before him and frowned. But Spink was bright as polished brass. There was about him a flare, a confidence, and it, too, was something new.

He smoothed the parted moustache about his mouth and laughed at nothing. He needed nothing concrete to make him laugh these days. His thoughts could do the trick, and did at constantly recurring intervals. Now his shining eyes lighted on Malloy and the line of men beside him and the sight seemed to tickle him immensely. He snapped his fingers and held up his glass and a table-tender, shuffling flat-footed in the sawdust of the floor, came over and filled it again.

'Jest leave th' bottle,' Spink said loudly. 'I feel like drinkin' t'day.'

More than one eye among Price's flankers settled speculatively on him and someone said, 'Ain't that th' feller you had th' fight with, Price? One that hit Cochise?'

Price nodded.

'H'm'm,' another opined pensively. 'Ain't he th' feller's so handy with a gun? Seems like I heard he was.'

'Yeah, I heard that, too,' another man said. 'You hear that, Price?'

'Yes, I heard it.'

'Know anything about it?'

'No.'

'Was a pretty slick shot that cut Cochise's rump, too, wasn't it?'

Price didn't answer but the line of men nodded.

'Was so,' someone said. 'Was so. Price, you got a enemy all right. But why? A fight ain't no good reason for a man t' be so vengeful.'

So a seed was sown in Reading's Flat and a lot more men began to keep an eye on Sylvester Spink. And Spink himself took on the airs of affluence and importance. He wore his good clothes constantly and took good care of them. He kept himself sober enough to stay out of the calaboose, and he spent most of his time among the cabins at the south of town. But strangely, he still stayed away from Lovelace Powers. He had her promise and he knew that she would keep it, given under pressure and in the grip of fear though it had been. When he was ready for her—good and ready he told himself exultantly—he would go and get her, and that was all there was to it. But there was a thing he had to do before that, a thing which rode him night

and day and kept him awake sometimes in the dark hours with the fury riding high in him.

He could not forget the sight of Lacey Powers on a young brown mare, nor her face on that dance room floor. And the thing that loosed the fury in him was the fact that a man had been the cause of both—a man he must get rid of. To kill Price Malloy would be an easy matter for one so skilled in ambush as himself, but there were the men of Reading's Flat—that odd long line of men beside him at that bar, and last but far from least, there was the Mountain Man and a knife that was like a flying flame. Sylvester Spink had no desire to come to grips with either.

With the first fall of darkness Price Malloy left the Silver Star.

He took the slender roll from behind Cochise's saddle and carried it across his bow as he rode down along the dusty road, thinking of the things inside. Things to please a girl, a young and gentle girl whose eyes spoke so honestly of love, whose lips were warm and sweet as honey thrice refined. He didn't know where he'd heard that phrase, but it described Lovelace Powers exactly. She was sweet and good and there was in her a rare quality of uprightness, a refining of the spirit. She was too good for him, she was too good for any man, and yet she was all woman, rich with promise, lovely and desirable. So he forgot the blow which had been struck in Rainbow Valley and that he had an enemy. Those were unhappy things and he had no time for anything but happiness this night. He was eager to see Lacey, to feel the touch of her lips, her arms around his neck, to watch the light of joy dawn on her dear face when he gave her the gifts in their wrappings. He would make a ceremony of it, doling them out to her one by one. The set ring first, since it would be her engagement one, and then the old worn one with which he would some day marry her, watching her eyes, her lips, the flush of pleasure on her cheeks. Then the hoops for her little ears, the hand-carved combs of jade. And lastly he would give her the length of silk, white and lustrous, for a wedding gown. Dreaming his dreams he had reached the cabin yard before he was aware, was jolted back to reality when Cochise stopped at the familiar step before the closed door. The

night was cool with the feel of fall that was just around the corner. He dropped his rein and rapped on the rough planks and his heart leaped at the sound of the light feet crossing the floor inside. When Lacey opened the door he reached for and drew her out for just a magic moment in the night.

'Honey,' he said softly, 'my dear—my dear.'

He drew her tight against his breast, holding her as if he would never let her go, and kissed her as men kiss the woman of all women on the earth, long and hungrily, yet with all the tenderness of his heart and soul.

He felt the shaking that set up all through her slender body and exulted as all males exult at the stirring of love beneath their power.

At that moment the golden future seemed almost too great to bear, a glimpse of Heaven brought to earth for one fleeting moment.

'Kiss me, Lacey Miss,' he whispered. 'On your toes, Mrs.—Price-Malloy-to-be. I come bearing gifts—but at a price. You'll have to buy them. Kiss me—hard—and often.'

It was at that precise second that a strange thrill of portent struck into him, for she did not raise her head which lay against his shoulder as if she were ill with a great weakness, and her once eager arms hung at her sides. In a sort of breathless silence they stood so for a long moment. Then he heard her sigh so deeply it was like a sob, and she lifted her cheek away from him, drew back from the circle of his embrace.

'Price,' she said, stopped, and took a long breath, tried again. 'Oh, Price—I don't know how to tell you this—but—but I—can't take your—gifts. I can't—'

Stupidly the man peered at her in the dim light from the oiled window. He could see the droop of her head, the shoulders slumped as if beneath an intolerable weight—Lacey—his Lacey of the courageous heart, the indomitable spirit which drove her to work so hard to make a way of life in the new land. He took her elbows in a grip that must have hurt and drew her close that he might see her face. What he found there shook him to his foundations.

'What,' he said quietly, 'is this? Are you sick? Is anything wrong with Jabed?'

'No,' she said. 'It's—it's just that I—I've made a mistake, Price. A big mistake. I can't—marry you—'

'Can't marry me? Why? In the name of Heaven, *why?*'

'Because—I can't. Not possibly. Don't ask me—for—for reasons, Price. Just take my word for it—please—please.'

Astounded beyond measure the man stood silent, thinking wildly.

What had happened? What under the shining canopy *could* have happened in the short time they had been apart? In *any* time, since they had made their promises, given their solemn troth? For a few moments it was amazed wonder which held him. Then the meaning of her words struck him with full force: a blow so hard it rocked him back on his spiritual heels, set an actual physical nausea in the pit of his stomach. Slowly he loosed the grip on Lacey's arms, let her go. He drew a deep breath that hurt his lungs.

'I see,' he said, 'but I want to know you really mean this; that it's not just some fancied reason. Are you sure, Lacey, completely sure?'

'Yes,' she said dully. 'I'm sure.'

'I thought you loved me,' he said, 'as I love you, with all the force and power in me.'

At that he heard her gasp, felt the slight, involuntary movement of her hand reaching toward him, only to drop again.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Did you love me? Do you love me now?'

For answer she covered her face with her hands and he knew that she was crying.

'Don't,' he said gently. 'I'm not worth that. No man is. And I take it you are sorry to hurt me, to have to tell me this. Well—I'll not ask you what you don't want to answer—so—I'll be getting on.'

He stepped away, picked up Cochise's rein, threw it over his head and stepped into his saddle. He had turned away when he realized that he still carried the once-precious package under his arm. He reined back and held it down toward her.

'Will you take the—the—little gifts, Lacey?' he asked gently. 'Just take them. You need not open them—now. Just put them away against another day. A happier day, Lacey Miss, I hope.'

You see I'll not give up hope. Without that a man is lost for sure.'

Without a word the girl reached and took the slender bundle and Price Malloy left the place at Cochise's full-stretch run. With that final break something inside him seemed to break, too, and all the full tide of despair surged over him. A despair that beat against the elements of wind and speed and action as if so to find some wild easement to his heart's unbearable pain. And back at the lonely cabin Lovelace Powers laid her face against the rough log wall and entered her Gethsemane. She did not cry now. The tears had dried at their source and it would be long before they ever ran again. Some things are too deep for weeping, too hard and final for its comforting. And so she bought the peace of an old man's heart, laid with this sacrifice the spectre of Captain Reed's determined conscience, the sinister tree over east of Reading's Flat. And it was fear that drove the sorry bargain, the deadly fear of Sylvester Spink, for though she might lay the whole matter before Captain Stephen, might win him to doubt that double testimony which Spink and Pond would offer, there was still that wild red light in Syl Spink's eyes to reckon with. Spink who was so crack a shot, who had no scruples as to murder, who could kill a man on the high trail up Rainbow Wall and who could prove it on him? So she stood in the night and died a little with every laboured breath, holding the poor small gifts against her breast, and once again they were forgotten.

And out a little way across the flat those same small eyes glowed red beneath a manzanita bush and watched her as a panther might watch a lost abandoned fawn. The neat moustache lifted above the big white teeth in laughter that was without sound. Sylvester Spink saw the first real working of his satanic plot. When finally the girl opened the door and went inside the cabin he rose, brushed off his new clothes scrupulously, settled the broad hat at a rakish angle and headed south toward Dunlavy's house. There a meeting would be held this night at which men would organize, calling themselves the Freelanders, or the Spink Farm Land Company, and where many of them would draw the last hitch in the strangling of their consciences.

13

THE TIDE BEGINS TO BUILD

AND Price Malloy went home to the house in the cottonwoods under the Rainbow Wall. The sweet, familiar world was strange around him, the whole bottom seemed to have fallen out of the universe. Where he once had known content and a vast and wholesome pride, he now saw nothing down a future which had suddenly ceased to exist. The dead dream of the herds of handsome horses he had meant to build had struck him hard, but he forgot it now in the dull agony of Lacey Powers' loss. A loss he could neither understand nor justify. That she had loved him all these heady, soft fall weeks he had no doubt. That she did not love him now he could not accept. No woman as good and honest, as upright and human as this brown-haired girl, could stage a play like that. No, she had made no mistake in thinking that she loved him. She did love him. She loved him now or he was no judge of the human heart. Her tears, her shaking hands, the dropping of her whole small body against him in despair she could not hide, all told him this as surely as though he had not heard her words denying it. But that she meant to give him up was just as clear to him. She had broken the bond between them in stark finality—but why? What had been brought to bear upon her? By whom? His mind went first to Jabed whose treatment of himself had been such a strange mixture of embarrassment and avoidance. Did Jabed dislike him, distrust him, enough to forbid the girl his company? That was not the answer, for Lacey was no child to be told what and what not to do and to obey. She was too much a person in her own right for that, a balanced, thinking adult. No, it was something else. And suddenly the wild and arrogant face of Sylvester Spink flashed across his mind. Spink. The sharpshooter. The

scout and trailer who could pick a man off without a sign of guilt. The man who'd sat at the Powers cook-fires half across the Plains. Who had looked at Lacey Powers in those twilights —who might be jealous. Who might have sat high on the crest of Rainbow and sent that warning shot across Cochise's rump. Things were shaping up in Price Malloy's thoughts, and with that shaping something of the black despair went out of him. He straightened in his saddle, pushed his hat back and rode into the corral at home with something of his old feeling. The bottom came back into the world again and there was a future. Some way, somehow, he would unravel the sorry tangle and maybe see the light come back to Lacey's face.

Back at the cabin at the south of the town that fair young face was turned to the rough log wall as if never to face the world again, and in the little room beyond, Jabed sat on a little stool and stared at the darkness. He knew that the die was cast, that she had made her sacrifice and he wondered if it was worth it. Not just his own life and honour. They were nothing. It was what would follow after for her if he were hanged on the tree out east of Reading's Flat because two men had sworn away his life and a third was bound by a vow of conscience. Captain Reed was so bound, as he had told the train at disbanding, and he would not break that vow, Jabed well knew.

And suppose they hanged him, Jabed Powers, for the murder of poor Ben Hyland on that lost little creek on the Plains, what would it mean to the daughter left behind? Shame, and a tarnished name, and the clacking tongues of women throughout the settlements of his new country.

Someone would marry her, of course, but so long as she lived there would follow her the sinister whisper that her father had been hanged.

So Jabed gripped his shaking hands and considered many things. There was the old rifle . . . But that, too, would be a shameful ending, a confession, sort of, of the very thing he sought so desperately to prevent. And there was flight, just a going away some dark night to lose himself in the stark and lonely hills. Maybe that would be the best, a natural and not dishonourable finish to a life that had been of little import in the world. Yes—

maybe that would be best. It was light of the moon now and one would need deep darkness for so secret a journey. So finally the old men went to bed and was lost in the comforting sleep of the weary old.

And down at Adam Dunlavy's house that fateful meeting was winding to a grim decision. Men were silent for the most part, thinking long thoughts, weighing family safeties against rights and wrongs, seeing two futures, the one live with chance, the other one fraught with poverty and more hard trails to follow, with a constant lessening of their scant resources, too poor to cross back over the continent. They listened while the man of the moment, the newly important Sylvester Spink, laid out his plan of backing and refund.

'You men understand,' he told them largely, 'I ain't doin' this jest out of the bigness of my heart. No, sirree! I aim to charge you all th' interest th' investment will rightly return, so's that someday I won't have t' break my back a-diggin' fer gold in these damned gulches. I aim to marry an' settle down my own self, an' I want a business to look forward to. With th' intrust that you men'll pay me from what you raise an' sell to Hank Baker's store, let alone th' stream of folks goin' through this country an' starved fer truck fresh off real farms, w'y, I won't have t' work. Not for a long, long time.'

It all sounded reasonable and fine, and at the meeting's end nearly all the men gathered there had signed the papers which Judd Pond had laboriously written out. It would have been noticeable to an outsider that none of the more settled, thinking men of the train contingent were among them, especially Captain Reed.

'I want no truck with any schemes Syl Spink cooks up,' that honest man had told them flatly. 'I'll get my land, but it won't be in a way that will trouble my conscience the rest of my life.'

He little knew how soon he would be involved in the darkest, most diabolical scheme of that same Sylvester Spink, nor how it would hurt his upright heart to be so.

But now a little time elapsed, a breathing spell as it were, for the forces which this sinister man was letting loose among them to build itself into that 'rolling tide' of which he had once spoken. First he stored his flamboyant clothes with Minna at the

Silver Star. Then he bought all the good liquor he could carry and with Pond behind him set out for the diggings where they had their hidden shaft. It was surprising, even in that hectic day, how rich and easy of access their 'load' was. As seems so often and unexplainably unjust, that fickle jade known as Lady Luck smiled broadly on this renegade and his sullen and disgruntled partner. The walls of the shallow tunnel they had run were rich and soft with gold bearing rock which crumbled like ancient cheese beneath their picks and shovels. So rich it was that they broke it up and took only those pieces which were nearly solid with the yellow substance in vein and crevasse.

'Eye-yah!' Spink said, grinning. 'We got enough t' start us in more schemes than one, right here in sight!'

'But it won't last for ever,' Pond said. 'These loads all peter out in time.'

'Think I don't know that?' the other snapped. 'I aim to get myself all set before it does.'

'You get set,' Pond said. 'Always you. Where do I come in? An' what I got t' show for my half of things?'

Spink looked at him that day with the peculiar red glow beginning in his eyes and Judd Pond felt his spine prickle.

'Got receipts from Wells, Fargo, ain't we?'

'I got no receipts,' Pond said. 'I got nothin'.'

'You got my word fer half. We're pardners, ain't we? Pardners in everything. Ain't we?'

'Yeah. We're pardners.'

'In *everything*, eh, Judd?'

There was a thin tightness in Spink's voice.

'Yeah,' Pond said, 'in everything.'

'That's better. Now get t' work an' dig. I got to have all we can lug down to show for th' financin' of th' Spink Farmland Comp'ny. Some sound to that!' He chuckled with deep inner humour.

'Some sound! An'a dam' sight more than sound.'

At Reading's Flat a strange, new tension was growing among the people who lived there. Men talked in the Silver Star, at Hank Baker's store; their women gossiped together.

'What's this about a Free Land Company?' someone asked curiously, 'and who's behind it? Ain't much free land around here that's worth a tinker's whoop for farming. Some in th' valleys over th' Trinity range west of here, but it's all a mighty long ways off from anywhere. Also the Injuns ain't to say overly friendly the deeper in you go. Some Diggers and Pomos scattered around who hate the emigrants. Can't blame them much, either. They're not getting too good a deal.'

'Seems it's th' wagon people, some of 'em, who re talkin about Free Land an' Squatters' Rights. Talkin' about Captain Sutter over in th' Big Valley. About th' Sacramento Riots an' what's been goin' on at Yerba Buena. Say jumpers jest go take lots right in th' laid-out town, build fences an' hole up inside with rifles. Been quite a few killin's an' th' law men jest can't seem to do anything about it. They're afraid to protect th' rightful owners because th' Squatters threaten t' shoot 'em if they do. An' no one knows what th' Commission will do once things get straightened out a bit—whether it'll hold with th' owners or th' Squatters. No one knows what land will be declared in th' Public Domain, an' so open to settlement by anyone can take it, an' what won't. It's anybody's guess.'

The sight of Lacey Powers' face gave the women added cause for talk.

Going for her weekly supplies she encountered this and that one, and all looked at her sharply.

'My stars alive!' one told another. 'She's as white as milk! No colour in her cheeks at all, and her eyes are sunk in her head like no young girl's had ought to be. There's trouble there, you mark my word, and we'll hear about it one of these days.' 'Hold your tongue and your judgment, Ida,' Annie Baker said tartly. 'The girl's all right.'

'Oh, yes? And how do you know so much, Annie?'

'I know Lacey,' Annie said largely, completely forgetting her own suspicions of so few days back.

And Lacey came and went, made her regular bakings, sold her wares and talked to her customers as usual except for the quiet dullness which had replaced her sparkling laughter. The crowds of men at her counter quieted, too, knowing uneasily but

surely that somehow the girl had received an almost mortal blow. They rarely saw Jabed any more, for the old man spent his days sitting in the pale sun behind the house, or working at the wood pile. And Price Malloy stayed out of town as long as possible. Sam Blunt came back to his fleshpots and talked loud and long about the ambushed horses at the head of Rainbow Valley.

'Price,' he said disgustedly over his seventh glass of whisky, 'says he's got t' *know* who done it 'fore he'll call a man. Me, I'd call an' let th' son-of-a-bitch prove himself clear. Skunks ain't 'titled to consid'ration. An' I figger they's skunks around this here country.'

'Amos Awn's of that same opinion,' someone answered. 'Seems he druv a prowler off from Blackbuck's camp, four-five nights ago.'

The Mountain Man pricked up his ears.

'Where's them two pis-ants, Spink an' Pond, got their mine?' he asked. 'Anywhere's in Blackbuck's direction?'

'Not too far. Camp's over Little Snake ridge, diggin's east of it.'

'H'm'm'm,' Sam said ruminatively. 'Skunks do travel.'

Someone else travelled a bit that next week when the whole town seemed waiting for something to happen. Little Susie Hartnell saddled her bay gelding and went for a ride alone. It was nothing new for her. She was a good rider and often rode for hours in the edges of the hills, or along the narrow valley's floor toward the north. Now she struck out that way, but once in the timber where the rising slopes began, she turned back and headed for the trail which went up and along the top of the ridge above the Rainbow Wall. This was Price Malloy's trail and few had ever travelled it. It lifted sharply along the mountain's breast, lost in buck-brush and manzanita and the soft blue smoke of wild lilac when it bloomed in spring. It was narrow and winding but fairly well defined by the shod hoofs of Cochise, and she had no trouble following it. There was an excitement in the girl, a feeling of adventure, of crisis ahead, and her blue eyes were dilated. She was a trifle pale and the freckles stood out across her little nose with a certain childish

charm. Susie was pretty in a soft blonde way, but her eyes could sometimes betray that softness, for they could harden into agate coldness, their pupils drawn to pin-points. Now they stared unseeing at the beauty of the high country around her, for she was lost in introspection, tense with purpose. At the little trampled level spot where Price was accustomed to let Cochise rest and blow a bit, she turned the gelding and sat looking down upon the valley she had left. She saw the town with its moiling life of wagon, ox and pack-train, the dust rising from the rutted road between the raw pine buildings, the better red brick structures, the road itself lying out at either end. Her eyes followed that narrow ribbon south to where the tiny cabins of the wagon people clustered, and that agate hardness drifted across them. There lived the young woman whom she hated with such a bitter sharpness, the girl who had danced in Price Malloy's arms, who meant to him the thing that she, Susie, valued above the world and all it held. Her soft lips set together in a straight line and she jerked the gelding into action with a heavy hand.

The trail led up to the long crest of the ridge and turned north along it, close to the rim-rock of the great wall. Here on her right was spread out the panorama of an amazing, small world, apart and sheltered, beautiful beyond words, lying far down under the face of Rainbow Wall. Here was the domain of the man she loved. The very thought of any other woman in it was like a band around her heart. She put the gelding to a reckless lope and soon was angling down along the steep trail beyond the rockface to the valley's floor. Once more she quickened pace and when she came into the yard at the log house among the cottonwoods, her red hair was loosened from its braids, flying in a curly cloud about her shoulders, her cheeks were live with colour. The dilated pupils of her eyes gave them a seeming of excitement, a sparkling darkness. When the man working at the corral fence straightened from his task and smiled up at her she felt a shock of anger at the change she noted in his features. Whatever had passed between him and Lacey Powers had taken toll of him and hot resentment flared in her. But she returned his smile, and shook back her wild red mane, and leaned a little from her saddle to look deeply at him.

'Hello, Price,' she said.

'Hello, Susie. How come you're so far from home?' he answered, dusting his hands and dropping his hammer beside a post. He pushed back his hat and wiped his forehead on a none-too-clean rag which he drew from a hip pocket. The smile was still on his face but it was not in his eyes. They were tired and sombre, as if he had not slept for a long time, and the girl in the saddle felt a fierce desire to take his head in her arms, and comfort him, after the manner of women, good or bad, since time was.

'Why,' she said smoothly in answer to his question, 'I just took a notion to come and see you, to look at your valley and your old Rainbow Wall.'

She turned and glanced back and up at the stupendous precipice but her face showed nothing of awe or appreciation.

'It's the wrong time to see it, Susie,' Price said patiently, 'too late in the day. It's sun-up which lights it like a flame, a great wide flame, monstrous and indescribable.' He, too, looked up and there was sadness in his gaze. For a moment he forgot the girl beside him, thinking of what the Wall had meant to him—would have meant to one other—with its vast and spiritual beauty. Then he glanced at Susie and waved a hand about.

'Want to get down and take a look around at my small kingdom?' he said. 'Not much, I'll admit, but I like it.'

'I do, too, Price,' Susie said eagerly. 'Yes, take me down.'

She swung her knee from her saddle horn, hung her rein over it instead, and held down her arms. Price knew she was perfectly capable of dismounting with her horse still in motion, had seen her do it, but he reached up and took her under the armpits, swung her down toward him. Softly yielding she sank in against his breast, her mop of hair swirling across his face. It was an old, old trick inherited, and sober as he was these days the man could not help a moment's amusement, it was so palpably designed. He grinned down at her and led the way around the corral toward the spring, the little stream, the tall red lilies late-blooming on its edge. He showed her where his small garden lay, the milk house of fitted stones which spanned the tiny creek, pointed out a bee tree high on the eastern slope.

'It's nice,' she said slowly, 'but don't you ever get lonesome, Price?'

'Lonesome? No. Never once since I've been here. Too much to see, to do, to plan for.'

He stopped abruptly, as if a hand had slapped him, at the sudden memory of all the plans which lay in ruins—at the valley's head—at the cabin south of Reading's Flat—and his mouth hardened.

Sharp as a tack in the mental up-take, Susie saw the change and calculated it correctly.

'I know,' she said softly. 'The mares and the pretty colts. You had great plans for them, didn't you?'

'Oh, yes—I had—plans.'

'But Price—there are more mares. There can be more colts. You're not finished just because you lost those particular ones.'

'Of course not, Susie. It's just that I'm mad to my boot-heels about them. No man likes to be beaten. Especially by something he can't get his hands on. Forget it. Like to see some fine new calves?'

'I'd rather see your house,' the girl said. 'What it's like inside.'

For a moment Price looked speculatively at her.

'Better not,' he said. 'It wouldn't look too nice, Susie, if someone should happen to see a kid like you coming out of a man's house.'

'Who on earth would?' she asked. 'Nobody'd come this far from town.'

'Can't tell. Someone was around when I was gone—at the valley's head, you know.'

'Oh, don't be such a prude, Price Malloy! I'm not afraid of being seen—and I wouldn't care if I was!'

She walked away from him, opened the door and entered the log house.

The interior of the one big room was definitely a man's place, man-made, the simple work of hands and tools. The rough plank table, the several crude chairs, the fire-place with its flat-stone hearth, the bunk built against the eastern wall; all were solid, dependable, adequate but unbeautiful, yet the

girl drank in the sight of them avidly. Here was the setting of Price Malloy's life, where he cooked his food, smoked his pipe in the fireglow of nights, thought his long thoughts, and slept.

That those thoughts had never been of her she knew, but that made no difference. He *would* think of her from now on she knew, too. She meant to make him think, to give him food for thought. It was what she'd come here for, and now she turned toward him and looked at him so long and deeply that the man felt an uneasy prickle on his skin. He reached for his pipe, filled it, struck a lucifer from the block on the stone mantel and lighted it. He bent and threw the match stem into the fireplace. When he straightened up the girl was beside him, so close he could smell the dim scent of the lavender which her mother kept in the clothes press at home. Her loosened hair was like a fiery cloud around her little face, her lips were parted over her white, childish teeth.

'Price!', Susie Hartnell said in a voice so low it was like a whisper, 'Oh, Price!'

The man was twenty-six years old and he had lived as a normal man lives. He had known women of several kinds, not too many, but enough, and his keen mind, reading this young thing on the instant and correctly, was astonished. He knew her for what she was, what her deep wanting of him had made her, and resentment rose in him.

'No! Oh, no!' he told himself. 'Not this kid! Not little Susie!'

Aloud he said with sudden briskness, 'Let's go and see the new calves now. They're a pretty sight.'

He turned toward the door behind him, but he was not quick enough.

The girl was there before him and as he met her she came in against his breast with a little rush of her slippers feet. She slipped her arms around his body, flung the soft mass of her red hair high across his face and hugged him to her in a grip of steel.

Taken completely off his feet Price Malloy stood for a moment helplessly. Then a real revulsion seized him and he reached back and caught her slender wrists. He had to pull hard to unclasp her little hands.

'Damn me, Susie! he gritted. 'What in thunder do you mean?'

She looked up at him with a flame of passion in her dilated eyes.

'What do you think I mean?' she said. 'I'm in love with you! In love with you from the ground up! Every inch of me! Every beat of my heart! Now and for a whole year—two—ever since I first laid eyes on you! And you wouldn't see it—wouldn't see me as a woman! Only as a little girl. Little Susie! Little Susie Hartnell—just a—just a kid! When I'd give my life—my soul if I have one—to be your woman!'

She was panting now, her breath coming hot between her parted lips, and suddenly she raised herself on her toes and kissed him on the mouth.

Hard and eager and with such living fire that no man could have failed to feel the passion in her, its promise, its offering. Price Malloy so felt it and for one blinding moment his arms tightened on her slender body, his lips drank in that pouring kiss. Then he wrenched himself free of her, pushed her from him. She staggered back against the wall and looked up at him through the red fringe above her eyes, and she was like a starving animal. The man stared at her, and he, too, was breathing hard, but for another reason. His mind had flashed to Lovelace Powers and the kisses she had given him that magic night when they had pledged their troth which was to have been for ever. The very thought sent a surge of nausea through him at this present situation.

He drew a hand across his eyes and with the motion the moment passed, the cabin, which had swung about him, settled back to normal.

He reached and took one of her hands and held it quietly.

'Susie,' he said gently, 'if you really do love me, then you can understand what I am about to say. I love someone, too—from the ground up. Someone I thought to marry and whom it seems I've lost beyond recall. So you and I—we're in the same hard case. I can't have Lacey Powers—and you can't have me—because there must be love on both sides when people elect to spend their lives together. You are so young that you'll find

someone else—someone nearer your own age—and you'll forget about all this. I tell you it's true, Susie. It's the way life is.'

'And you?' she said sharply. 'What about you? Will you find someone else to—to love?'

'I'm afraid not,' Price said soberly. 'You see I'm older—and I'm a one-woman man. Now let's go get you started home. You mustn't be too late.'

He led her outside, still holding her hand, and caught up the bay gelding's sagging rein, unhooked it from the saddle horn, and stooping down, took her small foot and tossed her lightly up. He smiled up at her.

There was no answering smile on the young face. It was pearly pale and the grey eyes looked like polished stone. She had lost her try, but there was one shot left in her armament and she fired it point-blank.

'And what,' she said thinly, 'if I tell the folks at Reading's Flat that you should—should—marry me and won't? What then?'

For a long moment Price Malloy looked wonderingly at her. When he spoke his voice was quiet.

'If you do that, Susie,' he said, 'I'll take you over my knee in the middle of the street and spank you—hard—and publicly. I will not be blackmailed.'

He slapped the gelding smartly on the shoulder and turned away.

In a burst of roaring speed the horse and the girl on its back went away from there, and in her heart was all the ancient fury of a woman scorned.

SYLVESTER SPINK came back to Reading's Flat and he was ready. Between them, he and Pond carried all the gold that he would need for his great venture as a man of affairs, namely the financing of the Spink Farmland Company. The new and as yet ephemeral name had a rich, euphonious sound which rolled on his tongue like music. He was full of life and vigour, keyed to some high, thin-edged pitch of inner excitement which drove him like a whip, and he knew well what it was. It was the same thing which had driven him all across the plains when he looked at Lacey Powers, which filled his days and nights with one deep, overpowering urge, the urge to own this girl, body-and-soul if possible, bodily if not, to clear his path of any and every thing which might threaten that possession. He was a man possessed himself, sunk in a maniacal passion which could not be denied and which would stop at nothing. This time he set the ball of his whole life and the lives of many others rolling. Those others comprised first and foremost Lovelace Powers and her broken old father, those of the wagon people who had signed those papers in Adam Dunlavy's cabin, and lastly Price Malloy.

Price Malloy whom Syl Spink hated with a wild and insane fury. Sometimes his hands shook with the lust for murder, remembering the look on Lacey's face when she danced that night in Malloy's arms, and only the cold reasoning as to what would follow if he shot the man deterred him. Well, he told himself, there were other ways. Ways to break a man, to drive him out of the country, to remove him for ever from this lost little world of Reading's Flat, and Sylvester Spink was master of those ways. And so he gathered the squatters around him on another night

and laid the last of his plans, tied up all loose ends of chance, showed them some of the heavy gold, most of which he had deposited with Hank Baker against food and clothes and implements, and set a time for action.

'Syl,' someone asked anxiously, 'what about shelter for th' families? It's almost time for th' winter rains, so th' old timers say, and we can't build cabins in a day or two.'

'We built 'em here, didn't we? In almost a day or two?'

'Yes, but there was more of us workin'. Everybody worked. Now we're only about half that number.'

'All right. Don't need so many cabins, then. Works out th' same either way, don't it?'

'Well, yes, mebbe.'

'Mebbe be damned. It does.'

'What about weapons? Need powder an' lead.'

'This ain't a war!' Spink snapped. 'Numbers count an' th' numbers are all on one side—our side.'

The speaker subsided in a sheepish silence. There was among these men on every side a certain uneasiness, a faint feeling of guilt which they could not put down. And none of them liked the man who was to make their venture possible. None trusted him. All across the Plains he had moved in a sort of dim disparagement, only to blossom now into this new character, the business man, the moneyed plunger in a settled future, drawing interest on a valid investment, telling them how, where and when to move. And none of them liked the glances of their fellows among the train people who held aloof from the Spink Farmland Company, Captain Stephen and others like him: the solid upright men who would rather struggle honestly than accept a compromise of conscience.

But they were poor. They had found no Midas gold and they had wives and children. So they turned their land-hungry eyes towards the best prospect for land the rugged country offered and ranged themselves behind Sylvester Spink. And that worthy was well satisfied. So satisfied that he suddenly decided the time was ripe to make his next move in this great matter of life. He would go see Lovelace Powers.

To that end he made provision. He shaved his red beard,

combed the parted moustache meticulously over his full red mouth and bought a gay new vest from Hank Baker. This had come around the Horn in a sailing ship from Boston and it was the last fine word in elegance.

Made of heavy yellow satin, it was embroidered in high relief with green and scarlet flowers, its buttons cut-jet discs, its binding the rich silk tape which tailors across the world put on the best of their products. Under the long black coat with its finely flaring tails this garment gave a touch of elegance rarely seen west of the Rockies. The good boots, too, were cleaned and polished. Taken by and large, Sylvester Spink looked like anything but himself when he came one night to knock upon the door of the Powers house. And knock he did, politely, as if he not only looked, but was, a different man. A cultured man, one of prominence in the new community, a solid citizen of the future.

When the girl opened the door he took off his hat with a courtesy unknown in him before, and smiled ingratiatingly.

'Howdy, Lacey,' he said genially. 'Thought I'd jest drop by a minute.'

Lacey did not answer and he tried again.

'Won't you ask a man in? After all we're old friends.'

'Come in,' she said dully and stepped away from the opening. The man came in, closed the door behind him and laid the new hat on the table. He pulled out a chair, carefully spread the fine coat-tails and sat down.

There was none of the usual bluff arrogance about him. He sat decorously, not a-straddle, his arms crossed on the chair-back as was his habit.

No, this was Sylvester Spink, man of affairs, not the wagon scout counting the scant wage of chip-and-chip-in that he had been at trail's end.

Now he looked at Jabed on the stool beside the stove.

'How are you, Jabed?' he said.

'Fair,' Jabed said, 'just fair, Sylvester.'

He made no attempt to talk. This man had done too much to him and his, could do so much more. There was in him an apathy, a giving up.

In the small silence Spink drew a long cigar from an inside

pocket and removed its band. This, too, was a mark of new estate, this fine thing from Havana, tossed on two oceans over months of time, finally to give its fragrant breath in, talk that would be tragic. He bit its end, spat it politely in a corner, and lighted up.

When the clear blue smoke rose above his head he looked at Lovelace Powers and smiled. It was the smile of destiny, confident, serene, and with a chill along her young spine the girl knew it so.

'Well, my girl,' Syl Spink said softly, 'I've come t' make plans. Our plans. We'll be gettin' married 'long about Wens'dy night. I'll see th' Parson, if that's who you'd like, an'—'

But Lacey spoke at last, sharply, like a stroke of steel on steel.

'No parson, Sylvester Spink,' she said. 'I'd not degrade the Word of God in such a travesty. I'll marry you, as I said, because it seems I must, but only by man's law, not God's.'

Spink waved the cigar largely.

'As you want,' he said, 'jest so's th' knot is tied—an' good an' tight.'

With the last few words his suavity fell away and the stark passion in him leaped out. It was suddenly apparent in the flush that rose in his shaven cheeks, the way his tongue came out and licked his thick lips, in that strange red burning which began to gather in his peculiar eyes.

'All right, th' Judge then,' he said, 'but Wens'dy night, like I said. I'll make arrangements.'

Here Jabed stirred on his stool, raised his haggard face and looked at the man beside the table.

'Don't hurry her, Syl,' he said piteously, 'give her a little time to—to get used to thinkin'—'

'How much time?' Spink asked suspiciously. 'What you trumppin' up, Jabed?'

'Nothing,' Jabed said, 'and maybe till—till Saturday?'

'It's dark of the moon then,' Jabed said, his eyes far away from the tense small room, 'full dark.'

'What in hell's that got t' do with a marryin'?' Spink asked angrily.

'Just seems—/seems like—it—it's fitting,' Jabed said.

'No,' Spink said doggedly, 'let's get it over with. Wens'dy night I'll be here—with th' Judge.'

He rose, pushed back the chair and picked up his hat.

'An' you be ready,' he said, looking at the girl with those strange eyes.

'I'll be ready,' Lacey Powers said. She did not look at him but at the figure of her father sitting so oddly upright on his little stool and staring so far away. When Spink had gone she went to him and leaning down, put her arms around his shoulders. Her heart ached to feel how thin they were, how the bones stood out through the wasted flesh.

'There, Pa,' she said gently, 'don't fret so hard. There are worse things.'

'Couldn't be, Lacey,' Jabed said, 'to see you marry that—that—devil's spawn——. No, there couldn't be. There just couldn't be.'

Price Malloy was at the Silver Star. Always a light drinker, he had broken his rule this night. For some reason which he could not fathom he had come to town as if the furies drove him. For once there was no comfort on his lonely hearth in Rainbow Valley, no solace in a pipe. Memories swirled in his mind of Lacey Powers. Lacey laughing over the long plank counter. Lacey riding the little brown mare in Annie Baker's side-saddle, watching the sunrise set the ancient fires to burning on the great rockface. Lacey, alight and sparkling on a dance-room floor—and Lacey in his arms, her eager lips on his, her arms around his neck, her soft voice promising her love for ever. It had been more than he could bear this night, and here he was drinking the Star's raw liquor, listening to the roaring place, watching with narrowed eyes the moiling, gold-mad crowd. Men who were his friends drank with him, a long line of them, flanking him against the bar. Sam Blunt, his buckskins flipping their fringes along his arms with the regular lift of glass and bottle, flanked him manfully.

'I jings, Price,' the Mountain Man said admiringly, 'I ain't never see you put it down like this a-fore! Looks like you're aimin' t' lay us all in th' ~~swamp~~

'You've never seen me like this before,' Price said heavily.
'Thet's right. I wish't t' Pete I knowed whut ails ye, boy.
'Taint only th' mares an' colts.'

'No,' Price told him, 'it's not. How right you are.'

'Well, 'tain't none of my business.'

'Right again, Sam.'

The *tempo* of the room continued to rise. The tables were crowded, the line along the bar moved and filled and moved again to let newcomers have their chance at its varied refreshments, and a web of talk and laughter hung above the place. Minna and Trixie and Lilly Ann were doing a brisk business, wheedling for drinks which they barely sipped, piling up their rake-off on the barkeep's record, and frankly seeing to it that they got some of every handful of coarse gold flung upon the tables. They made a laughing game of scrabbling for the little nuggets, paying for them with empty kisses, but their eyes were live and avid. Someone had made a more than ordinarily rich strike somewhere in the Trinities over west and the whole place was helping to celebrate.

It was into the midst of this that Sylvester Spink and Judd Pond entered along around ten o'clock. Spink was resplendent in his flamboyant clothes, his hat on the back of his head, his thumbs in his armpits, but Pond was dark and silent. He wore no finery and the expression of his eyes was cold and sullen. Something of the odd deference towards his partner which had been always so apparent in him seemed to have disappeared, to be replaced with a watchfulness, a withdrawing, as if a bond between them had been loosened. Only Spink himself seemed unaware of this. Every man who knew the unsavoury two was conscious of it.

Now they came into the big room, Spink in the lead as usual, and stood looking around at the crowded tables, the full-up bar. Finding one small table empty for the moment Spink promptly took it, sat down with a conscious flourish of the long coat-tails and held up a hand for the server's attention. When that worthy shuffled over to him he said loudly, 'Whisky —th' bottle. An' see it's th' best. This here's an occasion.'

He looked around for interest in his statement but there was

little on the faces of the crowd. No one took Sylvester Spink too seriously.'

Only Price Malloy turned around and, glass in hand and back to the bar, studied him with frowning eyes. Spink's shifty glance saw this and he was vastly tickled. When bottle and glasses were brought he poured and drank with exaggerated nonchalance, tossing off the fiery liquor as though it were water, wiping his mouth delicately with the new white handkerchief from the tail pocket of his coat. The other side sagged with the worn old revolver that was always somewhere on his person.

Time passed and nothing happened. There was the slap of cards on canvas, the whirl of roulette wheels, the talk of many men, the laughter of women. The three prospectors who had struck pay in the Trinities were getting very drunk, the crowd around them listening avidly for a loose word which might betray their location, and Minna took a whole gold-poke unnoticed from one of them. And suddenly Sylvester Spink could stand the inactivity no longer. Staggering a little he rose, pulled back his chair, stepped on it and mounted to the table top. He held up a hand, palm out, in a ridiculously regal gesture and called loudly for silence. When faces turned toward him he held up his filled glass which slopped a little and grinned down upon them.

'Sims,' he said, still in that lordly voice, 'set out your best for th' house. Step up, boys, an' name your poison. I'm celebratin' a bit myself to-night an' nothin's too good.'

'What's up?' someone called. 'You hit another load?'

'You might call it that,' Spink said, 'in fact I think you'll call it that. Th' biggest strike I ever made. Gentlemen, pick up your drinks. To-morrow night I'll be gettin' married. To th' handsomest girl in Reading's Flat. Boys—I give you my future wife—Miss Lovelace Powers.'

He threw back his head and gulped the half-spilled drink, threw down the glass in one grandiloquent motion.

But he alone drank that obscene toast.

A silence so deadly profound it was like world's end fell on the room.

Every man who had picked up a glass set it down again.

No one moved. No one spoke.

And then the high, thin voice of Sam Blunt, the Mountain Man, cut that heavy silence like a whistling blade.

“Tain’t no-ways possible,” it said, “no murderer’ skunk could wed a angel!”

And hard on the words there was action. Like a shot Price Malloy was across the space between him and that table. And like a shot he leaped and struck. The grinning face above the yellow satin vest went over backwards and like a panther Malloy went over the table’s top.

The fight that followed was something for talk long afterward.

Both men were young enough and both were hard with work and life in open country, and there was hatred stark and live between them. Men grabbed tables and chairs to clear a space around them, stood back to give them room. They fought like animals, threshing on the sawdust floor, rose to their feet and fought like men, and there was little choice between them. Where Malloy was lean and tall and wiry, quick on his booted feet, Spink was heavier, a solid thing of bone and flesh and muscle, able to take punishment and to dole it out. And both were fighting for that oldest of all reasons, a woman. Price Malloy fought for more than his lost hope of love, though that was the primal thing which made of him a primitive, a throw-back to the law of fist and fang, of unthinking hate and the lust to kill. He fought, too, although he was not conscious of it, for that scar across Cochise’s rump, for those dead mares and younglings at the valley’s head, and for the glory of the sunrise on the face of Rainbow Wall which he would never see again with Lacey Miss beside him. So he fought like a fury and there was blood on his mouth. It dripped from his hands and stained the satin vest whose cut-jet buttons were gone by now, along with the vanity of long-tailed coat, and Sylvester Spink was being stripped to his naked body, still fighting like a madman. He was a madman in all truth, for that strange red light was in his eyes and his thick lips slavered with a bloody foam above his teeth.

It was a death-fight and all who witnessed it were conscious of the fact. But destiny stepped in, as so often happens in the

affairs of this strange thing which we call life, and stopped it at dead-centre.

The doors of the Silver Star flew open and a man stood there.

Adam Dunlavy had the voice of a bull, deep and powerful and far-reaching, and now it struck across the silent scene like a clarion.

'Boys!' Dunlavy cried. 'Something bad has happened! Jabez Powers is missing! We're starting out to hunt—and we'll need every man in town. He's old and sick—and might be he'll do away with himself if we don't find him. For Lacey's sake we got to find him first.'

The booming words stopped both men in their tracks—Price just at their heartsick sound, Sylvester Spink because they were the stroke of doom to all his mighty scheme.

Jabez Powers—his ace in the hole—his trump card—his fool-proof royal flush!

As if he'd never seen him he forgot Price Malloy. Staggering with near exhaustion, his clothes flying in bloody ribbons around his battered body, he started running for the door. Like some supernatural scarecrow he went down the dusty road toward the lighted cabins at the town's south end—and all the town went after him.

Only Price Malloy, standing alone among the broken chairs, breathing in great gasps, did not follow. He and one other. The Mountain Man who picked up a wet'rag from the bar and gave it to him.

'Wipe your face, boy,' the old man said, 'an' thank whut stars ye worship. Mebbe they won't be no weddin' to-morrer night. Ain't you goin' down?'

Holding the rag, Price shook his bloody head.

'No,' he said. 'Why should I?'

'I always knowed you was a lunatic,' Sam said pensively, 'but I shore never took ye fer a fool before.'

EVIL IN THE NIGHT

A MONG the houses of the wagon people there was the sound of voices, of boots on beaten earth, lanterns bobbed like giant fireflies. Men called to one another, women stood with shawls around them listening, and Captain Stephen Reed talked earnestly to Lovelace Powers. The girl was white as milk in the dim glow of up-held lanterns, her eyes enormous, and her mouth shook piteously. She was trying hard to be calm, to answer him coherently.

'When did you miss Jabed, Lacey?' the Captain asked. 'And how?'

'He wasn't well, Captain, and to-day he'd seemed so strange. Far off, in a way, as if he didn't hear half I said to him. He didn't eat, hardly a thing all day, and twice I caught him looking at me with such a strange expression that I was uneasy.'

'How? What sort of expression?'

'How can I say? Just strange—sad and quiet—and his eyes were so deep sunk—'

She shut her lips to still their quivering, and Captain Stephen nodded.

'I see,' he said kindly. 'Never mind, Lacey. Jabed *is* sick and it looks like he's a bit out of his mind. It often happens with the old and sick. But how long's he been gone, you think?'

'I don't rightly know,' the girl said, swallowing, 'to-morrow is sale day and I was busy getting ready, up later than usual, and before I went to bed I thought I'd go take a look at him. Was near ten o'clock, I'd say. And when I opened his door it was so still I got the candle and went on in. He—he—wasn't there. The bed was still made up and the window was open. That's all I know. But oh, Captain, find him! Please find him!'

It was a cry of anguish and the Captain put a steady hand on her shoulder.

'We will,' he said. 'You go on back to the house.'

But she could not be idle and when the great line of the men of Reading's Flat, spaced at ten foot intervals, began to move toward the mountains at the south she was behind them. In their very forefront was Sylvester Spink calling on new spurts of energy to drive him forward.

Filled with a frantic urge he must find Jabed Powers or drop in the attempt. And so the hunting line swept out of the town, across the little south flat where the cabins stood, and into the lifting fringes of the hills. This was a more than ordinarily lonely stretch of country, for it had never yielded gold and those who had prospected it had long since given it up as barren. Only Jabed and the wagon men frequented it, and that for wood for the winter fires. Here and there an abandoned tunnel gaped in the undergrowth, and high on a jutting shoulder there was a deep old shaft —.

There were guns in that hunting line, and now and then it fired them off, listened for any answering sound. Adam Dullavy's great voice boomed on the dark slopes.

'Jabed! Jabed! Jabed!' he called, listened and called again, but only silence answered him. The lanterns were an eerie sight, bobbing up the slants in a ragged line, and Lacey followed them a little way behind, half blinded by her tears. Of all that climbing crowd only she and one other knew the truth and both were frantic in the face of it but for vastly different reasons.

'Oh, Pa!' the girl whimpered silently. 'Oh, Pa! You—you tried to save me!' And 'Damn your old hide to hell!' Spink raged as silently.

It was a long, hard climb, but the men of Reading's Flat had hunted the lost before and their methods were highly adequate. Nothing the size of a full grown man could have slipped unnoticed between the links of that line. And it was so they found Jabed Powers. High on that jutting shoulder they came upon him, standing like a shadow among shadows and the lanterns picked him out in stark detail. His tired and tragic face, his white hair and beard damp with the night and the effort, his

sunken eyes like great pools of darkness in the flickering glow, he looked at them and said nothing. It was Captain Reed who went cautiously forward and spoke to him gently.

'Sho, Jabed,' he said, 'you sure gave us a fight. It's easy to get lost in these mountains, especially for us new-comers. We're just prairie folks, I guess, not hill people. You too tired to walk down? Want the fellers to carry you a piece?'

For a long moment Jabed did not speak and the men, gathering in around him, watched anxiously. Then he swallowed and shook his head.

'Thank you, Cap'n,' he said, his voice sounding rough and rasping as if he had not used it for a long time, 'but—no. I—I can go down.'

But the sudden and monstrous change in his small universe, namely the right-about-face from welcome death to unwelcome life, was more than he bargained for and with the first step his tall old body tottered.

Adam Dunlavy sprang and caught him, and for a moment the two men wavered oddly as Adam's right foot slipped into nothingness beneath him.

Then he righted himself, pulled Jabed forward, and looked wonderingly down where someone raised a lantern. He looked up and into Captain Stephen's eyes, and his own were wide with horror.

'My God!' he said. 'A shaft!'

At that moment Lacey Powers burst through the crowding group and flung herself against her father's breast. She hid her face and wept and her sobs were loud in the dark silence.

'Oh, Pa!' she whimpered. 'Oh, Pa! Pa!'

'There,' Jabed said wearily, 'there, there, child. It's all right. It's—all—right.'

With his arms across the shoulders of two men, they half carried Jabed Powers home and to his bed in the little room with the open window.

No one said much and Lacey only looked at them from the cabin's step, her eyes suffused with tears.

'Gentlemen,' she said. 'I—I can't—thank—'

'You needn't, girl,' someone said from the crowd outside. 'We know.'

'But I do!' a voice said loudly and Sylvester Spink stepped up on the sill beside the girl.

'I thank you, boys. I sure do—fer Lacey here an' fer myself—seein's we're goin' to be married to-morra night, like I said earlier this evenin'. An' you're all invited t' be—'

But Lovelace Powers had had all that she could stand.

'No!' she cried, half screaming. 'No! Never! Not to-morrow night or ever in this world! You've done too much to us already! Now get away from me!'

She shrank back against the door frame, but Spink reached out and caught her arm, jerking her toward him. Above his torn and bloody clothes, his dishevelled body, his eyes began to glow as they had so short a time before when he had tried with all his might to kill a man. His tongue came out between his swollen lips and smoothed them vilely.

'Hush!' he rasped. 'You don't know what you're sayin'! You promised. You'll keep that promise!'

'Not if you kill us both!' she answered dully. 'And I call all these men to witness!'

Here the crowd surged forward as if her words had released them from some kind of spell, and they laid hands on Sylvester Spink and took him bodily away from there. They rushed him back to town and turned him over to the tender mercies of Minna at the Silver Star, dusting their hands, giving him an ultimatum.

'If Lacey Powers,' they told him flatly, 'don't want none of you, you stay away from her. If you don't we'll see you do—permanent.'

So the violent, half tragic day was ended, but the talk did not die with it. It boiled in the Silver Star, and Hank Baker's store stayed open, and the women walked among their lighted cabins south of town, whispering.

'What is all this?' the men asked each other, frowning. 'How come that Lacey ever promised to marry a brash four-flusher like Syl Spink? If she ever *did* promise. An' what's she mean by sayin' he'd done too much to them, to her an' Jabed?'

'She must have promised,' someone said. 'Broke with Price, didn't she? Was goin' with him. Come to th' dance with him.'

Rode into Rainbow with him to look at th' Wall, I hear tell.
An' now look at him. Fine a man as you ever see, sober an'
prosperous, drinkin' himself blind an' fightin'. Spink over her.
Sure is somethin' funny goin' on.'

By dawn the town had settled down. A new contingent of tenderfeet came in from the Sacramento Valley at noon, driving a line of burros which they kept Jim Hartnell busy shoeing for several hours, and late in the afternoon an event took place which was to reach so far into the future that no man in Reading's Flat could foresee its portent.

A big-wheeled, light-bodied wagon behind a four-horse team came down the long slope—from the north. It was nothing to the new-comers, who paid it no attention, going about their exciting business of outfitting for the gulches, but here and there a man stopped whatever he was doing to straighten up and gaze with mouth agape in his straggly beard. On the porch of the Silver Star, by the hitch-rail at Hank Baker's store, they stood and looked. Then one by one they stepped out and down into the dust of the road, gathering in this and that small group to watch the outfit come. These were the old-timers, the settled men. In unbelieving amazement they watched the wagon come rolling down—for it was the first wheel in the history of the West Coast country to cross the Siskiyous! A wagon—where no wide trail led! A rig where only pack-trains had been known to go! A way was opened north—a road was born to the Oregon Country! And suddenly someone, realizing the vast import of that fact, threw his old hat in the air and yelled.

'Oregon!' the wild shout pealed. 'I'm damned if 'tain't a wagon come over th' Siskiyous!'

And it was so. The lean, browned man who drove it looked down at the astonished crowd and grinned. He pushed his hat back and scratched his head.

'Sure is,' he said. 'Howdy, boys.'

They pulled him from his high seat, sat him on their shoulders and carried him up the steps and into the Silver Star.

'Tim!' they shouted. 'Set 'em up high wide an' handsome!
Fer everybody!'

'Yeah,' the bar-keep said. 'Why-for an' who pays?'

'Fer th' March of Empire, ye doubtin' Thomas! An' I will!'
'So'll I!'

'Me too! I ben wantin' t' get to Oregon fer th' last whole year an' now I'll go! Tell us, stranger! Drink an' tell us.'

Dust pokes fell pn the bar, their owners shaking out their contents in the wild abandon of the time and place at any by-ordinary happening and Tim Sims raked in his take. Then he slid the bottles out and the show began. 'How come?' the voices asked. 'When ye start?' 'Where from?' 'How long it take ye, pardner?'

The stranger, tossing off three drinks in quick succession, wiped his mouth and grinned around him.

'How come—because I got tired of stayin' in one place. Started a week ago. From Fort Jackson.'

'Heard of Jackson. In Southern Oregon, ain't it?'

'Just a leetle above th' line, yes. In th' finest valley ye ever saw—wide as a whole county back East. Close to as fine a river as th' West Coast holds, not exceptin' th' Willamette or th' Columbia. They're jest bigger, is all. Fish four feet long layin' so thick in th' riffles you could walk on 'em.'

'Sho! What river's this?'

'Th' Rouge. Though they do say th' French was in there some years back called it th' Roozh. Means red—though why red I don't know. It's a fine bright stream.'

'If this all's such a fine country, Mister, why're you leavin' it?'

'Never said I'm leavin' it. Just wanted to see Californy. Can't a man travel an' go back home?'

'Sure can—an' we're glad you did. Seems like that's a better farmin' place than this, if it's all that wide an' level. Some folks here are wantin' land bad. Say th' gold will peter out.'

'It's layin' out up there fer th' takin'. An' now—thankin' you for th' drinks—I'll just go an' see about my teams. They're pretty tuckered. That last long haul over th' high top was pretty wearyin'.'

Sylvester Spink, lying on Minna's red satin covered bed, stared at the rough plank ceiling in a rage too deep for words. The woman had bathed his cuts and bruises, washed the blood

from his battered body, stripped away the last of his shredded finery and covered him with a light wool blanket. Then she'd left him to his thoughts, and they were violent. Fury and disaster rode them like twin witches. Where no more than a few wild hours back he had been on the very verge of all he wanted most, namely the bodily possession of Lovelace Powers, now he was stripped of that possibility entirely. Had it been only the girl herself he might still have forced her to his will with the old, old lever of threat and coercion, but with that cry on her doorstep she had made it something else. She had made it the men of Reading's Flat—and Sylvester Spink was afraid of them. Deadly afraid. Fear rode him, cold and prickly, fighting against the hot floods of his anger. His swollen mouth moved with obscene oaths, his heavy hands were clenched into fists. He was a potential killer but a cowardly one.

And he had suffered the crowning insult of the bully. He had been repudiated in public, whipped into submission by that most powerful of all human forces, the public itself. He could never touch Lovelace Powers again, even to clasp that unwilling slender arm. He could feel the thrill of its soft flesh in the palm of his sweating hand as he opened and closed his thick fingers. Lacey. He wanted her more than anything the earth held, even life itself. That passionate love which swept him was worthy of a better man, the only good thing about him, and it was darkened by baser things. So he stared unseeing at the roof above him and tried to sort his moiling thoughts into some semblance of order. Slowly the hot rage died, a cold and deadly thing came in its stead. The game was up for him in Reading's Flat, the flamboyant future which had seemed so certain lay in ruins. But he would not go down like some weak, defeated thing. No, not by a dam' sight! If he went down—as go he must—he would see to it that he took others with him. All the others who amounted to a tinker's whoop in his scheme of life. Lacey Powers and the silly old man who had brought things to this sorry pass. And the man at Rainbow Wall. Him more than all the rest. And there were one or two others. When he'd shot his last bolt he'd leave this country behind him for ever, start over some new place. There was gold enough in his name—*his*

name—with Wells, Fargo at Yerba Buena. Yes, he was not wholly done. There was a mark he could leave behind him and he meant to leave it. So presently he rose and dressed himself in the sober garments which Minna had procured for him and left the Silver Star by a back way. He went direct to Hank Baker's store and bought new clothes, a replica of the long black coat, a fine white shirt with ruffles on the front, and another wide felt hat. There was no yellow vest to shout his elegance at every glance, but there was one in magenta, sober but embroidered, and when he appeared again on the street of Reading's Flat he was, to all intents and purposes, still the man of affairs. His face was swollen from the terrible punishment of the fight with Price Malloy, and he was stiff in every joint, but he could still swagger as he walked. Little Susie Hartnell, carrying ten pounds of sugar from the store, looked at him with speculative eyes under her sun-bonnet's rim. They were alike, the young girl thought, she and this violent man, for Susie had heard all the talk that ran in the town, and each was filled with hatred. Hatred and love, and for the same two people. She hated Lovelace Powers because of Price Malloy, he hated Price because of her. They should work together, she thought bitterly, though it was too late. The town was up against Syl Spink and he would be powerless now to marry Lacey and take her out of Malloy's life. So Susie tightened her soft lips and went along home with her mother's sugar, and Sylvester Spink went hunting for Judd Pond.

He'd need Pond now. Yes, the time had come when he would need him, the time he'd held in abeyance all the while he was planning for the future. Pond was now his ace in the hole, his one and only trump card, and he would play him now. But first he must perfect that part of his scheme still left to him, and to that end, once he had found Pond and brought him to heel, he went down to Adam Dunlavy's cabin and talked long and forcefully to that troubled man. When he left the southern flat the sun was almost down on this momentous day and every man who'd signed those written papers had been gathered into one solid group, welded by their need. Anxious, a bit uncertain, not wholly sure of the issues involved, they

looked hard to the future and the gain that lay before them for the taking. Land. Good land. Squatters' Rights land. What would it matter in the long run that another man held it under title?

Titles were ephemeral things in the time and place. No one could tell their value. The line between right and wrong was wavering, dim of outline. And they were poor men, substance spent in the long, hard travail of the Crossing. They had found little gold. And they had families, all of them. Men among them who would not have done this thing alone looked at their wives and children and set their lips, fell in with those around them.

'How long? When?' Dunlavy asked.

'Now,' Spink said grimly. 'Th' sooner th' better. Old-timers say th' rains are comin'. You got shacks t' build, fences to set, ain't you?'

'Yes.'

'Then th' day after to-morra. That should give time fer everything. Mind—every man a team an' wagon—tools—axes—shovels—and guns. Don't ferget th' guns.'

'We ain't aimin' to gun-fight, Syl,' Adam said doggedly. 'All of us—against—one man? No. I'm not that low.'

'Low or not you better save your neck,' Spink said sharply. 'I said guns.'

A WITNESS CALLS A PLEDGE

PRICE MALLOY had never been so low in spirit in his life. After the wild upheaval of that day in Reading's Flat, its fury, its punishment, for he had taken punishment in plenty from Sylvester Spink, he had gone home to Rainbow Valley and stayed there. There was little work to do, what with his thinned-down bunch of cattle after the beef drive, and the loss of the mares and colts. He missed that handsome sight, spread like scattered jewels on the wide green floor, missed the soaring flights of speed where the youngsters ran in their slim-bodied grace. He had not known fully how much he prized them until they were gone. There was loneliness in the silent valley such as he had never known, too, and it clutched him as with a tangible grip. He caught himself looking off and listening, time after time, as if that phantom herd must come skimming down to the corrals to nibble his hands for ears of corn, to stamp and whinney at the corral fence. And the vast towering precipice of Rainbow Wall had lost its glory. He did not look toward it at the sunrise now, but busied himself beyond the barn, the house, the willowed creek until after that monstrous miracle had glowed and flamed and died away. He would never look upon it, he told himself, at the magic moment ever again. He could see too plainly the transfigured face of a brown-haired girl gazing up at it in rapt amaze, feel too poignantly the touch of her palm against his lips.

Two days later the Mountain Man came down the trail at the north end of the Wall and slid like a shadow around the cabin's corner to lean and peer in at the open door. Silent on his moccasined feet he studied the man bent at the fire-place with a skillet in his hand. Presently he nodded to himself and

spat loudly in the stillness. Price was up and around like a shot.

'You old fool,' he said relievedly, 'why don't you tell a man you're here?'

Sam Blunt looked at him wonderingly.

'Damnation!' he said disgustedly. 'How'n hell you 'spose I could do so any more'n I jest did? Heered ~~me~~, didn't ye? Hit thet rock so hard it smacked right loud.'

To save his life Malloy couldn't help the grin that stretched his lips.

'Come in,' he said. 'Ther's fried pork side, fried hominy, fried greens and a whole pot of coffee. Hank's best.'

'Boy,' Sam said. 'You'll rot your stummick out with all thet grease! Don't you ever *boil* anythin'? You fry dry beans?'

'Seen the time I could've eaten them that way.'

'But ye didn't—seem's you're still here.'

Price set the food on the hand-made table and Sam drew up a chair with his foot, sat down and laid his weathered old hat carefully on the floor beside him, his only concession to the niceties. From a sagging pouch across his shoulder which he called his 'possibles' he took a flask of rum and placed it between them.

'Sure does spice up coffee,' he said, 'an' this come round th' Horn from Boston in one them ships that's settin' in th' mud at Yerba Buena, lost an' lonesome cause all its crew high-tailed it to th' diggin's. Sure is funny whut th' very name of gold can do to a man. Same's love an' vengeance. I ain't hankerin' fer any them things. Beans an' ven'son an' a good big log to sleep by in th' hills. Whut more could a man want in this here life?'

'Then what you doing here with me?' Malloy demanded, 'because I'm likely to have me a good big dose of that last-named, Sam, and it won't be too healthy in my close vicinity around about then.'

'Who wants t' live for ever?' the old man asked. 'An' me, I never did like to stagnate. I'll be around, boy.'

Price looked at him with something very like affection in his blue eyes.

'I'll bet you will,' he said, 'and I couldn't hope to be flanked by a better man. You still got that knife on you?'

'Got her?' Sam said, surprised, 'ain't been withouten her in forty year! Yes, sir. Forty year come January I tuk her off'en th' deadest Injun I ever see. Over in th' Cheyenne country, 'twas, an' I'd had me a leetle rumpus with a small band of redskins. Small. Nothin' to mention. Only ten-fifteen. Carried me a Long-tom rifle ther'. Good gun, too. Ac'rate. But that was her last battle. Got so hot she busted right in my face. But she'd done' her duty. I used her stock fer a club then, an' a bit later I got me old Betsy here.'

He slapped his thigh where the ancient, honed-thin weapon hung beneath his buckskin tunic.

So presently the two men slept, Price in the deep oblivion of a mind and heart wearied beyond bearing, on the rope-strung bunk, the Mountain Man stretched on the hearth where the small fire flickered in the cool fall night. And under the marching stars the wide green floor of Rainbow Valley beneath its monstrous Wall slumbered in the last lone peace that it would ever know, for across the ridge in Reading's Flat the forces of that rolling tide were gathering headway. At six of the small log cabins the 'prairie schooners' stood, their bows once more in place, their weathered canvas stretched, their sided boxes filled again with the poor gear which they had hauled across the Plains. And in the stripped cabins themselves the families were oddly silent. Most troubled of all was Adam Dunlavy, whose conscience warred with his obligations.

These six men were decent folk, but somehow with the plan they had accepted their standing with those who had not had changed. No one came to wish them well in their new venture, no women ran back and forth among the houses. For these six families were no longer settlers in the strict sense of the honest word. They were *Squatters*. And that name, uncertain in its connotations, bore odium. Adam Dunlavy knew it. Tom Smith knew it. But it also carried the only grasp on a safe future for their women and children which they could see and handle.

So they, too, waited for the sunrise—and for Sylvester Spink.

'I don't like this, Annie,' Hank Baker told his wife in the privacy of their bed that night. 'They're mighty tight-tongued about it, but Syl Spink put up enough gold with me to run six

families a good, full year. Dunlavy an' Smith an' four others. They already drew against it for supplies, flour, salt-pork, beans, for several months. Looks like they don't aim to come to town much. An' another thing. They drew shot an' powder, too. Plenty of it. I don't like it. Where they're goin' can't say for sure, but I got right strong suspicions.'

'No,' his wife said slowly. 'I don't like it, either. Especially that last. Sounds like Squatters' war. An' where'd they squat around here to farm? There's only one place big enough an' rich enough—and that's in Rainbow Valley.'

'That's right. And if I know Price Malloy they'll need that powder an' lead.'

'I don't know,' Annie said, considering. 'Price is an upright man. He's not a killer.'

'He ain't a coward, either.'

'No, but he'd judge values, Hank. A man's life against a passel of land. A family man. And they're all that, the wagon folks. I don't just rightly know.'

'Well—I'd hate t' be out front when an' if that outfit hauls into Rainbow. An' Sam Blunt lit out to-day, headin' for th' ridge.'

'There is one,' Annie said profoundly, 'a killer, I mean. That old pole-cat'd shoot first—or throw that deadly knife of his—an' go see later what he'd got.'

Hank Baker grinned in the dark.

'He would so. Must be around seventy if he's a day and's quite a power still. Well, go to sleep, woman. It's none of our fight.'

'It is, too, Mister. I'm thinking of that white-faced little thing bakin' her crullers an' eatin' her heart out. If someone kills Price—.'

'No one's going to. Shoe's on th' other foot. Now get some rest, like I tell you.'

And at full dark that night, the empty cabins stirred. Men hitched up their horses, their oxen spans, women put last rolls of bedding in under the canvas tops, handed up the children. All was in readiness. They waited only now for the genius of their venture, Sylvester Spink, and presently he was there.

Eager, bustling, filled with a vicarious excitement, he gave what amounted to orders.

'You, Adam,' he said, 'I look to as head of th' Company, under me. You drive first, in as fur's you think you'll need so's every one of you'll have a hundred acres. They say they's more'n a thousand, twelve hundred, good level land on th' Valley floor. You choose your own place, then let Smith come next, th' others as you say. Main thing's to get in quick an' settle.'

'You mean *I'm* to lead th' movement?' Dunlavy asked sharply.
'Without you? Ain't you coming along? You started this.'

'Sure I started it. An' who for? You an' the rest. Th' women, th' kids. I'm makin' it possible, ain't I? With more grub in your wagons than you'd see in six months otherwise? With a chance to make yourselves th' home ye come across th' world for?'

Dunlavy's shoulders sagged and he turned away, mounted to his high seat and lifted his lines. He spoke to his team and the wagon rolled, first of the Squatter movement west of Sacramento.

The others fell in behind and these six families left the settlement.

Syl Spink watched them go with a grin on his heavy features. He raised a hand and snapped his fingers, turned on his booteheels, pushed his new hat forward and walked swiftly toward the cabin of Jabez Powers.

He took chances, but he had taken many, and this was a final throw of his dice of life, those loaded dice which he had thrown before against the helpless two inside the little house. Now he stopped at its corner and thought quickly just what he would say, how he would act, to draw that final throw. It must come true, if only for that one last chance. Then he snapped his fingers again, stepped upon the sill and rapped on the closed door. He knew the girl was still up for the window showed a light, and to-morrow was a business day. When she opened the door he looked up at her, his hat in his hand, a smile parting the meticulous moustache. There was about him a humbleness, something conciliatory and mild, a far cry from his natural arrogance. It was as if something had changed in him, some alchemy of the spirit worked a miracle.

'Lacey,' he said carefully, 'I've come to—ask you to—forgive me. I'm sorry I been actin' like I have. I know now it wasn't no way to win you—but it jest seems as if I've got to have you, girl, or die by inches.'

He stopped a moment and looked at her with all the soul that he could muster in his shallow eyes.

'I love you, Lace,' he said thickly. 'God! How I love you!'

He reached a hand toward her and it was shaking. Shaking with the last passably good impulse this man would ever know.

'Give me a chance,' he begged abjectly. 'Marry me now—to-day—an' I swear I'll do th' best by you that any man could do. Please, Lacey. Please.'

For answer the girl in the doorway reached for the latch and shut the door in his face. Without words it was the utter epitome of contemptuous finality. The man on the step knew it so. Knew it for the absolute end of any hope he might have still held concerning her.

And on the instant he blew up like an explosion. Red blood flooded into his neck and face, his mouth curled back above the broad yellow teeth and he raised his fist and crashed it in helpless fury against the rough adzed planks. One great, full-throated oath burst from him and he turned away, running. The girl heard the thudding of his boots and pushed the back window open a little way to watch him, and a cold chill shivered over her. Sylvester Spink was headed at last—at long and fear-filled last—for the house of Captain Stephen Reed.

Lacey let the window swing shut again, leaned her forehead against the wall and whispered desperately two words. 'Pa!' she said, 'Pa!'

There was a light in the Captain's house, as there was in all those which held the remnant of the wagon people. These were the 'conscience men', the true settlers, and talk was rife among them. Here and there they gathered in groups and stood listening to the sounds of the wagons pulling away into the night. Such a group stood in Captain Reed's yard, the women wrapped in shawls against the evening chill, the men troubled. It was into the midst of these that Sylvester Spink came, running at full

tilt. His new hat was still clutched forgotten in his hand, and he breathed like an animal pushed hard by hounds. In the shadows those strange eyes of his looked animal-wild too.

'Cap'n,' he said, 'I got t' talk to you. Th' time's come. Yes, th' time's come.'

'For what?' the Captain said. 'The time for what? Haven't you done just about enough for one while?'

'No, I ain't. I should have done more, long back. Yes, sir, long back! I've held my peace when I should have spoke up. Where can we talk, Cap'n?'

'Right here,' Stephen Reed said grimly.

'Before all these others?'

'What you getting at, Sylvester?' Reed asked with what patience he could command. He had never liked this man, never trusted him, even in the Crossing when the whole train's safety depended on his scouting. In view of these last events he trusted him even less.

'What is it you want to tell me?'

'Something bad, Cap'n. Bad an'—an' private.'

'There's nothing private between you and me, Spink, that the rest of us can't hear. Anything you have to tell me you'll tell here and to us all. Otherwise I won't listen. I'll be no party to your schemes.'

'This ain't no scheme, Cap'n,' Spink said, 'this here's history, you might say.'

'History? What on earth have we' got to do with history? You weary me, Sylvester.'

'Then you better get you some strength, Mister Reed,' Spink snapped suddenly, 'for you're a-goin' to need it. That is, if what you promised this here train to do, ever you got th' knowledge, in th' matter of Ben Hyland's killin' on th' Plains, is true.'

The words did what he had meant them to. They shocked his hearers into instant tension, instant amazement. Men leaned forward to get a better look at his face in the dim light from the cabin's window.

'Just what you mean?' Captain Reed asked carefully.

'Just what I said. If you want t' see justice done in that matter you better listen to me, for I'm th' only man can give you that

knowledge. Me an' one other. I know who killed Ben Hyland. I saw it done.'

'My God!' someone said loudly.

'You—saw—it—done,' Captain Stephen said slowly with pauses between his astonished words, 'and you've held back that knowledge all these months? Why?'

'Not so fast,' Spink said mockingly. 'Don't jump th' gun, Cap'n. I'll tell this in my own way—or not at all.'

'I think you will tell it, way or no way,' the other said, and there was suddenly a sound of iron in the usually quiet voice of Captain Reed, 'after a start like this. We'll see that you do.'

'Well, I mean t' tell it, but not because you threaten a man. As I said th' time's come an' I mean t' make a clean breast of it.'

He stopped and licked his lips after his fashion when emotion gripped him. Emotion gripped him now and it was as unholy a thing as he had ever known, for it was vengeance.

'All right, Cap'n. You mean what you told th' train? That you'd bring th' murderer to book, ever you could prove him?'

'I did. I made that promise in good faith. I'll keep it to the letter.'

'So be it. Well—th' man that shot Ben Hyland was——' he paused, sensing the drama of the moment and savouring it as one of his calibre would do, then went on. 'That man was Jabed Powers.'

If he had stricken dumb every man in the little group the silence which fell with those awful words could have been no heavier. It was like a tangible thing dropping on their hearts and souls with cold sorrow and disbelief.

Jabed Powers! Old Jabed, gentle, kindly, to their knowledge of him wronging no man! It could not be. It simply could not be. And suddenly someone found voice and said as much, loudly in the night.

'I think you're lying, Syl Spink,' the man called. 'Don't know why, but you're lying.'

'Needn't take my word alone. I got a witness. Two of us saw it done. Two witnesses against one make a balance of power, don't they?' Men moved uneasily at that, recognizing its deadly truth.

'But why would old Jabed want to kill so fine a man as Ben?' another asked. 'Where was there a motive?'

'Jabed's old an' ailing, ain't he?' Spink asked reasonably. 'Needs care an' good grub. What'd he do without someone t' look after him? An' th' whole train knows Ben Hyland wanted his daughter. Stood, t' get her, too, in th' natural run of things. He was well-off, money, gear. Them things count in a new country. Especially with women.'

'You mean to say Jabed would have killed Ben rather than see him marry Lacey?'

'That's just what I mean.'

'No.' 'It couldn't be. No man'd take such a chance.' 'Jabed's too good a man.' The voices were in full cry now, beating down this monstrous thing. A slyness crept into Spink's words, it was on his shadowed face, but they were too excited to notice it.

'Any of you recall a change comin' over him, out on th' Trail, just along about then? Got too quiet, didn't he? Settin' off by himself? Remember Lacey worryin' because he didn't eat enough?'

Once more men moved on their worn boots in the cold dust of the autumn earth, remembering. They did remember. And they thought swiftly back along the months which followed, right up to now. Right up to that line of hunting men on the mountain's slope, the old man, hollow-eyed and silent, standing on the lip of that abandoned shaft. It was not good memory: An old man—a guilty man—a grievin' man, maybe.

The protests were silent now, no one spoke for a long time. Then Captain Stephen drew a long breath that was like a sigh.

'All right,' he said heavily, 'let's have the rest of it. Who is your witness, Sylvester?'

'Judd Pond, of course. We was scoutin' together, wasn't we? Out south th' train that day. You will all remember that—we was *south* th' Trail. Ben Hyland an' Jabed Powers was huntin'—an' both of them was on th' north side. Am I right?'

After a strained silence Reed said 'Right'.

'All right. Took a scout t' hunt all ways. I was that scout, if you remember, an' I'd crossed over behind th' wagons, me an' Judd, to see if there was Injun tracks parallelin' our advance.'

Had seen some dust over that way earlier. So we went pretty well in cover—up along that little creek where the willers grew. Hadn't gone too far when we heard two shots. Laid low—crawled—an' from a thicket we both saw Jabed bending down t' look at somethin' on the bank. Then he straightened up an' blew th' smoke out of his gun barrel He went away from there an' we went up to see what he'd got—an' it was Ben Hyland, dead as a stone. Didn't you fellers ever wonder how come I found th' body so soon? I knowed where it laid.'

'And you never said a word of all this!' the Captain said. 'How come? Why? You've got some explaining to do yourself, Spink. Those are not the actions of an honest man. That's accessory-after-the-fact.'

'Explain, hell! Ain't I explainin' now?'

'But too long after. Why?'

'Ain't you got no wits at all?' Spink asked disgustedly. 'Think a minute. Wasn't I about to marry Lovelace Powers myself, right now, this very time? Would I ever had even that one chance if I'd told on her father knowin' th' store she sets by him?'

'That's so,' someone said reluctantly, 'that's reasonable.'

'Yes,' someone else said, thinking aloud, 'and Lacey humbled . him in front of everyone. Said she'd never marry him—not any time—ever. So there's your answer, Captain. He's a skunk if ever I saw one, but there's the reason he's telling on Jabed now. His chance is gone for good—and this is his revenge. He may be telling the truth.'

'We'll find that out,' Reed said evenly, 'and now—this very night. Come on—all of you men. We're going into town to see Judge Hirapp Macky.'

A POSSE FORMS AT DAWN

So the dark night folded down on this lost little outpost of human hopes and fears, its high plans and its tragic failures. While all the men left at the wagon settlement went up the road into Reading's Flat and the women put their little ones to bed in silent contemplation of the grim thing about to happen, Lacey Powers stood by that closed back window and faced the final break-up of her life. She knew what the outcome of Spink's accusation, backed by Judd Pond's witness, could well be. Jabed had no proof of innocence—and two men's word against his would hold that balance of power in a sober court such as Judge Macky would hold, and Captain Stephen Reed would press the justice he had given his word to a dead man to see through. The girl beat her hands against the wall and held the sobs in her throat that her father might not hear, and prayed as she had never prayed before, in anguish and despair.

Alone in a suddenly hostile world she did not know where to turn, what to do, to save Jabed from that tree out east of Reading's Flat.

'Oh, God!' she whispered through the pouring tears. 'Help us! Help us now! Please! Please!'

And suddenly Jabed was in the door between the two poor rooms, his hollow eyes deep sunk in the candle light. He looked like a wraith, so thin in his worn clothes, so old, so utterly resigned and hopeless.

'I know, Lacey,' he said slowly. 'I heard Sylvester on the step. I heard him running—south—to Cap'n Reed's. He'll tell what he's held over me so long—and there'll be those who will believe him. Him and Pond—and there's only one of me. My word against theirs. I never saw poor Ben that day on the Plains

until they brought him in, swinging in that blanket. I'd not have harmed one hair of his head—or of any man's—ever in my life.'

His daughter looked back at him and the tears began to dry on her white face. She reached up a hand and wiped them off, brought her shaking lips together. Something changed in her with that long look, something steadied.

'You needn't tell me, Pa,' she said, swallowing one final sob, 'and they—they'll never take you. Never in time!'

Suddenly she untied the apron from her slender waist and laid it carefully on a chair. She pushed the damp hair up from her temples where it clung in little curls, drew one deep breath into her lungs. The trembling died in her hands. Then she did a strange thing. She stepped to the table and blew out the two candles which flickered there.

She came like a cat, as noiseless, as sure, and stood beside Jabed in the dark and put her arms around him.

'Pa,' she said, 'there's one hope for us, one avenue that may lead out. It's worth the taking. Will you turn our lives over to me now, do just what I say, come with me and ask no questions? Will you stand firm by me, no matter what happens?'

For a long moment Jabed was silent, so silent that she shook him lightly.

'Yes,' he said then. 'Yes, Lacey. It doesn't matter. But what ever you want—'

'Put on your coat,' she said swiftly, 'and come stand at the east side of the house. We're going away from here.'

'How?' he asked dully.

'Never mind. You just stand there and wait for me.'

She got a little old cloth jacket from the trunk in the bedroom and put it on over her calico dress, took the rifle from its pegs and put it into Jabed's hands.

'It's no use, girl,' he said. 'We'd have less chance with this.'

'No,' she said. 'I feel to take it. Be careful, Pa.'

Then she was gone, still in that cat-like quiet, out of the door, out of the yard, running on light and silent feet toward the house of Captain Reed at the south. She swerved east around the cabin itself and came up to the small, makeshift barn where the Reed's team of big bay geldings stood in the darkness

nibbling at the last spears of their night's feed of hay. They were good, sturdy animals, gentle and safe, and she thanked her stars that the men were gone to Reading's Flat.

She was familiar with horses and the gear that went with them, and she felt expertly for the harness hanging on pegs against the wall. It took a few moments to get the bridles loose, to leave one long line on each, to tie its loose end to the bit, and to put them on. Then she unfastened the manger-ropes and led the team outside. Slowly, softly she took them away, and when she reached the east side of her own house she was already mounted, bare-back and astride, her wide skirts tucked around her knees.

'On the step, Pa,' she said, whispering, 'you'll have to jump a little. Give me the gun.'

In silence Jabed mounted and when the girl turned her mount away toward the north and east, he followed like a shadow. And presently, quiet as the world around except for the slow pad of unshod hoofs in the deep dust of the summer, they left the settlement behind and passed into the shadow of the ridge. That way lay the trail to Rainbow Valley. She knew just where it started up for she had watched Price Malloy and Cochise go that way too many happy times to fail. She did not fail now but put the gelding directly into it between the two big pine trees at the mountain's foot. Immediately they began to climb. They reached the small flat place where Price had let the stallion rest and blow a bit and the geldings, recognizing it for what it was, rested, too, for a little space. They were soft, for Captain Reed had used them little—for the hauling down of wood, the bringing in the wild hay he had cut for them—and Lacey did not push them. They blew a bit but took the steep trail well, and it was not long until they came out on the high and narrow crest which rimmed the great precipice of Rainbow Wall.

She set her mind to remember just how Price had described all the trail to her, the rim-rock, the scattered pines, the mile-long ridge, and then the sharp descent at the northern end. She would know it when they came to it because it passed right between two standing rocks as tall as a tall man's head, he'd told her.

And so it did, and so she recognized it when she saw the two tall stones against the dark sky where the stars wheeled in everlasting majesty.

The horse beneath her snorted and trembled a bit, peering down at the slanting depths below, but she coaxed him forward with whispered word and stroking hand against his sweating neck, and presently he took the unknown trail as a good horse will at its master's urging. The other followed and so these two poor humans, so suddenly turned from their upright ways of life into hunted fugitives, went slowly down into Rainbow Valley. The great spread of the level floor was dark as the nether pit and for a little while the intrepid girl felt fear take hold of her.

Fear of the narrow, sharply dropping trail, fear of the night itself, fear of what must surely be taking place behind them at Reading's Flat when Captain Stephen should arouse the populace and Sylvester Spink stand before that swift, uncertain tribunal and tell his damning story.

And lastly there was fear, swiftly passing, but nevertheless a fear of sorts, of Price Malloy himself. What would he say to her? How would he accept the words which she must say to him, the explanation?

Had he been too deeply hurt by her repudiation of the solemn vows which they had taken to understand and forgive? Would he stand by her now? Or would . . . No. Her mind and her heart together denied the thought. If he loved her still or if that love had died at her hands, he was not the man to fail her in her extremity. Whatever he felt toward her now he would take her in, she knew, would protect her and Jabez from whatever mob might come for them. So the fear lifted, the great descent was done and they came out on the valley floor in the deep dark and the silence. There was no sky-line here by which to steer her course across it, but she knew about where the log house stood in its grove of cottonwoods. And she knew, too, that the man within must not be taken unawares, for he had had enough to make him wary.

So far out across the floor she began to call in her high clear voice that was like a bugle in the night.

'Price!' it pealed. 'Price! Price! Oh, Price! Oh, Price!'

The man asleep on the bunk inside the house heard that first high sound and was up like a shot. Sam Blunt had heard it, too.

'Ef 'twa'nt fer th' words,' he said, 'I'd say 'twas a painter. It's painter high, painter keen.'

But Price Malloy knew it was no panther. He knew it was a woman—one woman out of all a world of women—and his heart jumped like a barren doe, first with a wild exultation, then swift on its heels with fear. That was Lovelace Powers calling him, and there was desperation in the sound. He was in his clothes in record time and had struck a light to the candle on the table. Then he was out through the door and running toward her in the darkness.

'Lacey!' he answered. 'I'm coming!'

They came together fifty yards from the corral fence, and the man reached up and caught her hand on the rein, gripping it hard.

'Lacey!' he said again. 'My dear—my dear! What is it?'

With the sound of his voice, the deeply tender words, all the fright and terror, the despair and hopelessness dropped from her like a worn and useless garment. She leaned down and kissed him as if there'd been no tears between them, no broken promises, no heartache.

'It's trouble, Price,' she told him simply. 'Bad trouble. There was no help for us at Reading's Flat—may not be now or ever—so we came to you.'

'Right,' he said. 'Where else should you go, my girl? But what—'

'Syl Spink,' she said, and at the name the man swore sharply. 'Sylvester Spink—he's finally gone to Captain Reed with a tale of—of murder on the Plains—against my Pa. He did not do it, Price, never in this world!—but Spink says he did and Judd Pond will back him up. And two against one could be evidence.'

'So that's it!' Price Malloy said slowly. 'That's the answer to everything!'

'Yes,' she said. 'He held it over us. Said if I'd marry him he'd never speak of it again. That he'd hold his peace for ever.'

'So you thought you could buy your father's safety with such a sacrifice!'

'But he didn't do it, Price, and they'd—they'd—hang—him on that tree out east of town! I had to tell you before—even if we—if we can't——' She stopped and swallowed as the flood of fear swept back upon her. But Malloy turned and still holding her hand in that tight hard grip, walked beside her horse toward the house.

'Oh, Lacey Miss,' he said gently, 'how wrong you were! It would not have been a bargain. All your life he would have held it over you still. But you can forget him now. There'll be no hanging on that tree in town. Come, Jabed.'

At the log house door Price drew the girl down and into his hungry arms for just one magic moment, laid his lips to hers. Then he gave a hand to Jabed and led him, weak and shaken from the night's strain, into the safe haven of the lighted room. He took the gun from Lacey and stood it in a corner, pushed up a chair and eased the old man into it, raked open the coals on the hearth. Then he straightened up and looked at the Mountain Man.

'Sam,' he said, 'Reed's horses must go back across the ridge. Take them over and turn them loose somewhere near the settlement so he'll find them in the morning. Then come back here—that is, if you've a mind for a fracas. I fancy we'll have one soon.'

Sam spat delightedly toward the building flames.

• 'Ever know me t' pass one up?' he asked. 'I'll be here before ye can say scat!' And he went silently out into the night.

'Now tell me,' Price said, 'just what is taking place in town, if you can guess. Where did Spink go? What did he do? How did you get away from him—and what made him decide to talk now?'

Standing beside the table with her hand upon it to still the shaking of her limbs, Lovelace told him the story from start to finish, leaving out no slightest thing, not even that line of hunting men and Jabed on the old shaft's rim.

'It was then,' she said, 'that I crossed the last mark, Price. I knew I couldn't marry Sylvester Spink if he killed us both—and somehow I felt he would, one way or another. So I said as much before all the men that night when we got back home

with Pa and I tried to thank them and couldn't. It was Syl Spink who did, with his high-wide-handsome florish—who told them he was marrying me next day. Something broke inside me then and I screamed that I'd never marry him, never in time, and when he tried once more I slammed the door in his face. That was late this evening, just after dark, and I knew I'd turned the die when I saw him running to Captain Stephen Reed—to talk at last. And Captain had pledged himself, in public the day our train disbanded, to bring to justice, if he ever got the knowledge, the man who killed Ben Hyland on the Plains. It was that knowledge—or what he said was such—that Syl Spink carried to him this night. So now you know it all—why I let you think I'd made a mistake when I pledged my love to you—and why I came to you now.'

'Sit down, darling,' Malloy said quietly. 'Sit here by Jabed while I make a pot of tea. And stop your fretting now. I'm taking over from here. We'll work it out, I promise you. Judge Hiram is an upright man and when you tell him all of this he'll look twice at Sylvester Spink or I miss my guess.'

'But Price,' the girl said straightly, 'that isn't all I've got to tell you. It's all of us. But there is more—of you. And it's because of me. All of it is because of me. Oh, Price, I've brought you only hardship! That shot across Cochise's rump—it was because I was with you in the Valley, I am sure. The mares and the handsome colts—you lost them, too, because of me. I know as well as though I'd seen it all—.'

'It doesn't matter, Lacey,' Price said, 'now that I have you back again. You're worth the world and all it holds to me. I think I've told you that before.'

'I know,' she said, 'but there is more. Oh, more than all these things I bring you trouble and disaster, for this very night, just after dark, half the wagon people loaded up their gear and drove away from the settlement.'

'Let them go,' the man said, lifting the boiling water from the crane. 'Small loss, I'd say.'

'But you don't know what they are and where—where they're headed, Price,' the girl said miserably, her dark eyes wide with the magnitude of the thing which she must tell him.

'Well,' he said, his old grin breaking on his face again after so many weary days, 'let's have it, honey. What are they—and where are they headed?'

'They're *squatters*, Price,' she said almost whispering, 'and they—they're headed here. For the—the whole south end of Rainbow Valley. They mean to take your land, a hundred acres each. Adam Dunlavy—and Thomas Smith—and four other families. I've heard the women talking. They'll be settled in by morning.'

She stopped with the whole dark thing laid bare before him and slowly the man laid down the pot of tea. Carefully, as if the action were of momentous import, he set it on the table and stared across it at the face of Lacey Powers.

'No,' he said softly. 'It couldn't be. It's women's talk, Lacey. People grasp at gossip and take it for the truth. No men would do a thing like that.'

'They've been talking Squatters' Rights, Mr. Malloy,' Jabed said suddenly, 'holding meetings at Dunlavy's house. And it's Sylvester Spink who made it possible. He's put up gold at Mr. Baker's store to feed the families until they get to farming. I've heard it, too.'

For a long time Price Malloy stood by the bare plank table and stared across the girl's head at the rough log wall. His eyes were blank with the shock of this knowledge which suddenly became the truth to him.

Spink. It was the name of Sylvester Spink which gave the thing that quality. Spink—who had hated him since that first day in Reading's Flat when he'd struck Cochise and the fight had followed. Spink—who, after his wild fashion, loved Lacey Powers. Who had tried in all ways short of killing to ruin him. And now he *would* ruin him in all truth if the squatters moved against him in force.

Price Malloy was an upright man, but there began in him now such a surge of murderous rage as drained his dark face white, narrowed his eyes to cold blue slits. This called for more than reliance on the law—the new, uncertain law of the free West. This called for a man's protection of his own. And suddenly he moved to the wall where his rifle hung on its

wooden pegs and took 'the weapon down. He stood it by the door, brought out a box of ball and powder which he laid beside it.

'You mean to—to gun-fight, Price?' the girl said fearfully.

'What else? If this is true—and I believe it is by now—I'd be less than a man if I didn't, wouldn't I?'

'Yes,' she said, 'and I will fight beside you. I can shoot right well.'

And so great forces moved together in the western night.

Back at Reading's Flat the sounds of many men rose in the stillness in Judge Hiram Macky's yard, fists pounded on his door. In the time and place it took but a breath of excitement to rouse a crowd and someone had gone running to the Silver Star with news of the startling accusation. Marshal Pettibone was in the van of those who streamed down to meet the wagon men coming up, and he took over where Captain Reed left off as leader.

'What is all this, Captain?' he asked reasonably, holding back the eager mass. 'What's happened?'

'Nothing's happened now, Marshal,' Captain Stephen said grimly. 'It's what happened months ago out on the Plains, and which has come to light this night. It's a sorry business and it needs judicial handling. I've talked to the Judge of it before. We've got to see him now.' They saw him soon, in a long white nightshirt and a ruffled cap, a candle held above his peering face. Judge Hiram Macky was an elegant man, used to the niceties, even in the privacy of his bed. Startled now into a somewhat ridiculous situation, he leaned forward the better to see who roused him at this hour, and, if possible, why. His glance fell first on Captain Reed with Pettibone behind him.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'is something wrong? You need my services?'

'Bad wrong, sir,' the Captain said, 'and yes, we do.'

'If you'll just give me a moment, then,' the Judge said with dignity, 'I'll be with you.'

They waited and the talking voices stilled, and presently his honour appeared again on his doorstep, clothed this time and ready for anything which might transpire. He carried a large

old-fashioned lantern, trimmed and lighted, which he handed to the nearest man.

'If you'll just hang that up on this pole here,' he said, 'we'll be better able to conduct whatever business is in hand.'

He waited while the light was hung on a nail high on a post beside the step, set there for that very purpose, and then looked out over the crowd of men.

'Now, gentlemen,' he said, 'speak up.'

Captain Stephen Reed stepped out a bit and looked earnestly up at him.

'You remember, Judge,' he said, 'that I came to you long back, when we first arrived here in fact, about a matter which had been troubling me?'

'I do,' Judge Macky said. 'It was a matter of conscience, of spiritual obligation, if I recall, on which I advised you to lay off, that it was not a material obligation at all and you would do better to forget it. Is that the matter?'

'Yes, sir. And you will recall, too, that I said I could not do so, that I had given my word to a dead man and must see the matter through. That I'd bring the guilty man to justice if ever I got the proof.'

'You have that proof now, Captain?'

'I am afraid I have,' the Captain said miserably.

'Afraid you have? Good Heaven! Then why are you here?'

'Because I must be. You can see that. Justice, sir, is no respecter of persons or their feelings. A man has been accused this night, by an eye-witness, he says, and with a second such witness in proof. I had to act. There is no other way.'

'I see,' the judge said slowly, 'and who is this man—this murderer?'

'As well respected a man as there was in our company, the last man in the world we could imagine would do so dreadful a thing. An old and ailing man. Mr. Jabez Powers.'

'Powers? The father of our little dough-nut girl?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Too bad! Too bad! And who is his accuser, if I may ask?'

Here Sylvester Spink pushed forward into the light, his evil face still charged with the rage and the final frustration which

that slamming door had set there. His small eyes glowed, there was a flush on his cheek-bones.

'I am!' he said loudly. 'Jabed Powers shot Ben Hyland on th' bank of a creek back on th' Crossin'—an' I saw him do it. I an' Judd Pond both. Powers an' Hyland was huntin' out north th' train, whilst we was scoutin' southwards.'

'That's strange,' Judge Macky said. 'How could you witness what took place north of the train if you were south of it?'

'We'd crossed over in back of it, lookin' fer Injuns which might be followin' it. Had seen dust over that-away.'

'And neither the murderer or his victim saw you?'

'We kep' to th' creek bed. Heard th' gun an' saw Jabed bending down to look at somethin'. Then he blew down his gun-barrel an' left out of there. We crawled forrad to see what he was lookin' at—an' we found Ben Hyland, stone dead.'

For a long moment the tall man on the doorstep studied the man before him looking up so eagerly, as if avid for his quick decision, for the inevitable hunt to begin.

'Where's your proving witness?' he asked finally.

'Right here,' Spink said, and there was triumph in his voice. He turned to look for Judd Pond, put a hand on his shoulder and pushed him forward. Sullen, his eyes smouldering with some inner surge of feeling, Pond looked up.

'Is this true?' Judge Macky asked. 'Did you, too, see what Spink saw? Do you say Jabed Powers killed Ben Hyland?'

Pond licked his lips, moved on his feet.

'Yes,' he said presently. 'Yes. I saw th' same. I say th' same.'

'Then,' the judge said resignedly, 'there is only one course to pursue, though I hate to have any part of it, considering that cabin at the south of town and the brave effort for survival which has been carried on there in its yard. Marshal Pettibone, the next move is yours. Take over, sir.'

The marshal swung around without a word and headed back into the dark road with all the men of Reading's Flat behind him. He turned toward the south, toward the settlement and that tragic small cabin where no laughing hungry crowd of home-starved men would gather at the long plank counter—ever again. This was the beginning of a posse.

THE ANCIENT FIRES OF RAINBOW WALL

IT was dark of the moon and a thin, cool wind was blowing. There was in it a seeming of sadness, of vicarious sorrow, a portent of disaster. Captain Stephen felt it and wished deep down in his honest heart that he, like Judge Macky, need have no part in the thing in hand. But that upright heart itself made that part imperative. The clustered cabins on the little flat were dark except for those which still held their families, and the tramping crowd approached them in odd silence. As the knowledge of their objective and its tragic possibilities was borne in upon them the talk had ceased. All the excitement of tragedy and drama had lost its power. They thought of the brown-haired girl, could almost smell the delectable perfume of her handiwork, could hear her happy laughter. This was no common mob, no eager posse, on the trail of some guilty human. This was a crowd of homesick men who had, for a few enchanted weeks, been carried in spirit back across a lonely world to all-but-forgotten kitchens and once-beloved women who peopled them. Here and there feet lagged—and the silence held.

They crossed the beaten yard of the Powers cabin and came to its step, its closed door, and saw uneasily that it was dark. No dim light showed in the oiled-cloth window, no wood smoke came drifting on the still night air. This silent crowd was not the only thing which was abroad that night. A little way beyond the dusty road, hidden by the growth of mezquite bushes, a slim shadow among shadows, someone watched and listened, slipped from clump to clump. Someone whose little mouth was tight above its pretty teeth, whose heart was filled with hatred and unholy hope.

Little Susie Hartnell in at the death, avid to see the finish of this tragic play which might mean so much to her in some not-too-distant future. Who knew . . . And she knew things to tell, things no one else knew.

Then the men came to a halt before the darkened house and it was Marshal Pettibone who stepped ahead and knocked loudly on the door.

'Powers!' he called loudly. 'Jabed Powers! Open up! Open up—in the name of the law!'

He hushed and listened. The men behind him listened in a strained quiet. But there was no sound in the silent house. He struck the door again, called on a heightened note. Sylvester Spink swore and hit the door a resounding blow with a stone from beside the step.

'Bust it, Marshal!' he cried furiously. 'Bust it down! Damned stubborn things! Go in an' get 'em!'

'Shut up!' the Marshal said as furiously, for he had no stomach for this flamboyant creature. 'Shut up and get away from here.'

Then Marshal Pettibone reached and pushed the door ajar, for it was not fastened, leaned in and called again.

'Jabed?' he said. 'Jabed Powers?'

In the silence he entered the house, felt in a pocket for a block of sulphur-matches and struck one on a piece of flint. In the feeble glow he found the candle on the table and set it alight, picked it up and looked around the empty room. Then he walked to where the door to the smaller one beyond hung open on its leather hinges and peered in at the poor furnishings. Here there was nothing but the built bed covered with a patchwork quilt, one hand-made chair, a little stool, and a table with the pathetic articles of an old man lying on it: a pipe, a worn bone-handled pocket knife, an ancient comb with missing teeth.

That silent crowd of men, taking turns behind him, stepped back and out to the yard again, and no one spoke, none raised a hue and cry.

It was the Judge who put the word to it.

'They're gone,' he said uselessly, 'got clean away. But how,

in God's name, can she hope to make it stick! As forlorn a hope as ever was! A young girl—and an old and ailing man—and only the mountains for refuge. I'm damned if I like this, gentlemen!

'But where?' Captain Stephen asked wonderingly. And how? They sold their teams when we first came here, if you remember. Money went for Lacey's first supplies at Mr. Baker's store. They can't get far on foot. Jabed isn't able.'

And it was there that Susie Hartnell, to the vast astonishment of her father in the crowd, stepped up on the sill and came into the candle's light. She looked at Judge Macky and then at Captain Reed and her grey eyes were almost black with the spread, excited pupils.

'I can answer that,' she said. 'I saw them go.'

'You *what*?' Judge Macky said.

'I saw them go,' the girl continued. 'I'd come down to say good-bye to Mrs. Dunlavy—I didn't know they were to go to-night—and I was—was——' She hesitated just a trifle. 'I was in the scrub outside the road a little later—and I saw La—Miss Powers—come out of this cabin, running. She held up her skirts and went fast. I couldn't even hear her feet in the dust, she went so light and fast.'

'Alone?' the Captain asked half desperately. 'And where? Where did she go?'

'Yes, alone,' the girl said smugly, 'and she went to your place, Mr. Reed. Right to your barn. I watched and waited and saw her come out leading your two horses. She got on one by your corral fence and led the other here. Mr. Powers was waiting in the dark by the house here, east side, and he got on the other horse. They had a gun.'

'Go on,' the Judge said harshly. 'What then?'

'Why, then,' Susie said, and the smile on her young face was not a pleasant thing, 'then they went out across the flat—north-east—to where the trail comes down the ridge from Rainbow Valley. If you go there I think you'll find them.'

There was distilled venom in her voice, matched on the instant by the half-strangled oath of Sylvester Spink.

'*Damn!*' he gritted. 'After all! After everything! Well—

marshal—what you waitin' ter? This is a posse, ain't it? Let's get goin'.

And so it was that, when the stars of the late night were paling in the first false-dawn the men of Reading's Flat, to the last one who could find a mount, went south to leave the settlement a bit off west, and headed east toward the turn of land where the great ridge came down to debauch upon the levels. Here the wagon people, newly become Squatters had gone before them on that momentous night. It was much farther than the trail along the Rim-rock would have been, but for so vast a crowd of riders it was the only way. Marshal Pettibone rode at the posse's head, and Captain Stephen Reed, whose doing all this was, for the first time in his life was at odds with his conscience. The Law was the Law, and an eye-witness was a hide-bound part of that Law, and two of them demanded unequivocal consideration. If only those witnesses had been anyone in all the world but who they were! Sylvester Spink and that sullen shadow of his every move, Judd Pond!

They were a bitter pair to swear a man's life away—and Spink had motive. The whole community knew that Lacey Powers had repudiated him with such passionate distaste that she had dared his vengeance on both Jabed and herself. To a man like Sylvester Spink that could unleash undreamed-of cruelties. It had, and now the Captain and the men behind him were on their way to give him satisfaction for that vengeance, those cruelties, and Captain Stephen was not so sure of the sanctity of Law. Jingling bit-chains, creak of saddles and the crystal stars on a dark night sky. The posse travelled at a running walk which saved their mounts and covered ground amazingly, and none among them liked the mission they were on except its instigator. Sylvester Spink was filled with a wild excitement. His thick hands fiddled with the reins, pushed the hat on his round head back, only to bring it forward the next moment, he shifted in his saddle and peered eagerly ahead for the first signs of nearing their destination. Those came when the first faint glow of true dawn began to touch the eastern sky. The posse reached the wide south end of Rainbow Valley and turned in upon it, circling the dropping slopes of the ridge which broke

abruptly to the flat below. They took the valley's centre and went north toward that upper part where a man had worked three years to build his hopes. It was still black dark between the ridges, but they made out a sight which spelled the death of that man's hopes, the bitter and ironic wage of honest labour, a sight they did not like. Spaced at wide and regular distances they came upon the white-topped wagons of the Squatters, three at the west side, three at the east, each claiming its hundred acres of the lush green heart of Rainbow Valley, and every man in that riding posse knew that each wagon held a Squatter armed and ready for the morning.

There had been deep and utter silence on all this journey, but now a murmur rose above the men.

'I'm damned if I like this whole dam' thing!' Hank Baker said softly. 'Too much like a pack of hounds after one lone fox.'

'You're right,' Henry Bilder answcrcd. 'Dead right. Malloy's a fine man. I hate to see him broke.'

'An' for a skunk who sniffs around a camp of women,' Amos Awn put in. 'Why'nt some of us jest have an accident? If a gun went off accidental behind that feller in th' fancy hat, why, th' Squatters would starve out.'

But Doc Prindle shook his head.

'Reading's Flat,' he said, 'will be a town some day, with a school and a church no doubt. It must have Law as well.'

• 'Dam' Law,' Tim Sims said frankly.

And so the forces moved, the tide rolled in, and the sunrise was coming over the eastern ridge. At the log house in the cottonwoods three people made ready to meet them, each after his own fashion.

Price Malloy put on his coat, picked up the rifle, its ammunition, and looked at Lovelace Powers.

'I'm going out to meet them.' he said. 'Squatters—posse—all of them. I'll see to it, if it's humanly possible, that nothing happens to Jabed. The men of Reading's Flat are sane and honest. They'll listen when you tell them all you've told me and weigh it against Sylvester Spink.'

He leaned and kissed her.

'It will soon be light,' he said.

He stepped toward the door. Behind him the girl lifted her father's gun and followed.

'No,' Price said. 'Don't come.'

She made no answer but her eyes were steady on his, there was no trembling in her. And over by the hearth Jabed rose, buttoned his ancient jacket and stepped forward. For a long moment Price Malloy looked at this poor, intrepid two, and presently he smiled and nodded.

'So be it,' he said. 'We belong together.'

Then he went out and headed for the corral where Cochise and the small brown mare waited in the cool dark. He saddled the stallion and lifted Lacey to his back.

'You'll have to go bareback, Jabed,' he said. 'I've only the one rig.'

'We come in that way,' the old man said simply.

'An' jest whut am I supposed t' ride?' a voice asked beside them and the Mountain Man was there, silent as a cat.

'What you always do—Shank's mare,' Price said. 'I'm glad you're with us, Sam.'

'Where else'd I be, boy?' the other asked, and fell in as the small cavalcade moved quietly out toward the broad dark reaches of Rainbow Valley beneath its waiting Wall. The light was coming fast. It fanned delicately across the eastern sky and sifted down among the shadows on the wide green floor—and showed that long, dark column of riding men with the Marshal at its head. At the same time six thin, tall blades of fire began to leap and glimmer by those spaced, white-topped wagons ranged so meticulously on the land they meant to steal. The men who built the camp-fires watched the play before them in amaze. Then two of them more courageous than the rest, more doggedly determined on their vicarious rights, moved out to join the column. These were Adam Dunlavy and Thomas Smith. The others stood and looked.

Sylvester Spink, riding abreast of Marshal Pettibone now, licked his lips and there was wild laughter on his face, held to silence only by the silence of the men around him. Judd Pond behind him frowned, moved uneasily in his saddle. Judd Pond, the sullen, the subservient, but the unpredictable. And so the

two groups of people caught in this tragic web drew on toward each other, came to speaking distance, stopped.

Price Malloy pushed his hat back on his head and waited, his rifle in his hands, his dark face pale in the coming sunrise. Beside him Lovelace Powers slid to the ground, pushed Cochise away and stepped close to him. The Mountain Man was delighted beyond measure, sparkling like some disreputable and ragged scarecrow lighted from within.

'I jings!' he muttered softly, 'I'm a-aimin' t' slice me up a skunk this day! Mebbe two of 'em.'

And then Marshal Pettibone spoke.

'Price,' he said, his voice clear in the cool dawn, 'I reckon you know why we're here. But first I want you to know we ain't got anything to do with them wagons down yonder in th' Valley. Smith an' Dunlavy will have to shoulder that. We've got a warrant for Jabez Powers. Murder on th' Plains. We guarantee fair trial, but you'll have to give him up. If you help him to resist arrest you'll come in for your share, too. Ain't no use of gun-play. We're too many for you.'

'And what makes you think, Marshal, that the men of Reading's Flat would fire on Lovelace Powers?'

'Not on her, of course, though she's accessory-after-th'-fact in bringin' Jabez away. No. You'd just get yourself killed and'd stop nothing.'

'I'd get me someone first, Marshal,' Price said evenly, 'and it might be you—before that other one beside you. Him I'd get for sure.'

'Wrong, Malloy!' Spink shouted suddenly. 'You'll never get me—but I've got you a'ready. Got you good an' plenty! Got your land—got your—'

'Yes, Spink? My herd of mares and colts?'

There was a cold and mocking anger in his words. The column listened silently. There was more here than they knew.

'And when you take the word of Sylvester Spink for the charge of murder,' Malloy went on, 'why not take that of Lovelace Powers? Let her tell you something.'

'Time for that's in court, Mr. Malloy,' Judge Macky said, 'and we'll hear her side, of course.'

'Not in court. Right now,' Malloy snapped. 'Tell them, Lacey. Tell them how this man has hounded you--how he threatened you and Jabed.'

The girl stepped forward and looked at the men of Reading's Flat.

'Yes,' she said. 'For months and months Sylvester Spink has threatened to accuse my Pa of killing poor Ben Hyland. Said no one would take Pa's word alone against his and Judd Pond's. That he'd see him hanged on that tree out east of town unless I married him. It got so bad—I was so afraid—I promised. I broke my word to Price—told him I'd—I'd made—a mistake—that I didn't love him. And I would—would have gone through with it—though the very sight of Sylvester Spink has always made my blood run cold. But when you found my father on the edge of that old shaft—then I knew how dreadful the whole thing was—and I slammed the door in Syl Spink's face. You'd all heard me refuse to marry him—and though you'd told him to keep away from me he did come back. Last night that was. You know the rest. I took your horses, Mr. Reed, and brought my father here. It was my last resort. Price understood and took us in—and—it is well with us again.'

She ceased, having told it all at last, and here and there a man swore softly, moved in his saddle.

'Now,' Price said, 'do you still think Jabed Powers killed that man of the Crossing? Why not Spink himself?'

At that Sylvester Spink yelled like a madman.

'W'y, you—you—Jabed killed him! I saw him! Judd Pond saw him! Didn't you, Judd?'

There was a silence and Spink swung round in his saddle.

'Speak up!' he cried. 'Speak up, Judd! Didn't you see Jabed kill—'

'No!' Judd Pond said suddenly and astonishingly. 'No! I didn't!'

Like a panther Spink was off his horse. He seized Pond by the wrist, pulled him to the ground and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. His face was transfigured, killer-livid, killer-mad.

'Speak up!' he screamed. 'Tell 'em! Tell 'em what I told you—'

'Yeah!' Pond cried in a high, thin voice. 'Yeah! What you told me to!'

With a sudden surge of strength he jerked himself free, ran backward, staggering with the violence of the wrench. His face, too, was changed. There was killing-fury in him. His weak lips shook, his eyes flared, after the manner of the cowardly faced with crisis.

'I'll tell 'em! Tell 'em who *did* kill Ben—an' it wasn't Jabad! It was—'

Like a snake striking, Sylvester Spink, the sharp-shooter, flipped his gun and pulled the trigger. Judd Pond bobbed his head grotesquely, raised a hand and let it fall and sat down hard on the level ground. Shocked to paralysing inertia the men about him saw the bright red stream that spouted from above his heart. But if they were still in that moment of horrified amazement, there was one who was not. Syl Spink made three wide jumps and reached the big black stallion where he idly cropped the dew-wet grass. In another he was on his back, had grabbed his rein and kicked him hard in the flanks. In that one split second he was gone like a long dark streak in the building light.

The Marshal swung round but Price Malloy was ahead of him. Out in the small open space which Spink's going had left between the ranks of men he flung himself down on one knee, his rifle at his shoulder. Keenly he pulled the sights in line but no shot came. He dropped the gun and lifted it again—and again he failed to shoot.

'For God's sake, man, *fire!*' the Marshal said.

But Malloy rose and shook his head.

'Cochise,' he said. 'I'd kill him sure! Spink's flat on his neck.'

They looked at him in wonder, though there were those who understood.

'He'll get away!' someone cried. 'Ain't no horse on th' whole West Coast can run with Cochise!'

The watchers, knowing this was true, sat where they were. No one took out after them. And then they saw the final bit of drama in this small play of the wilderness. They saw wild law take over.

Price Malloy flung his gun away, leaped to his feet, threw

back his head to fill his lungs to their utmost and put two fingers to his lips.

Just as the first level sun-rays struck the top of Rainbow Wall to set its ancient fires alight the long, shrill, keening whistle which they had heard once before at Reading's Flat cut on the dawn-still air. High, commanding, urgent, it filled the silent world about. Far down between the lighted wagons the big black stallion heard it. With every ounce of power in him he obeyed that wild command. Running at full stretch he sank his loins a little, put down his head, bowed his back in a high-arched curve, and set his forelegs. His front hoofs ploughed in the grass, his hind ones slid—and from the stance of that sudden and violent stopping the man in his saddle shot far out above the floor and fell, spread-eagled, his head in its fancy hat bent under at a grotesque angle. Only the silence heard the snap when his neck broke neatly.

Cochise turned slowly on his bunched black feet, blowing a little from the effort, and trotted back to where that silent band sat watching in a vast and unbelieving wonder.

'Done it!' the Mountain Man said clearly in the stillness. 'He done took payment for thet scar across his rump—an' fer his mares and younglings at th' Valley's head! He—sure—as—hell—did! He did so!'

Price Malloy walked out to meet Cochise and took the big head in his arms.

'Yes,' he said softly. 'You did the trick. You took full and sufficient payment.'

And a little way apart, Doc Prindle tried vainly to ease a dying man. Judd Pond, futile, weak, a failure, had done a trick also. He had saved a man from death, even while his wild revealing words had sent another to it. He talked now, bubbling through his spurting blood, and everybody listened.

'Jabed—never—killed—no one,' he said, "'twas Syl himself. He hated Ben because—of—Lacey Powers. Thought—Ben would—get her, once th' train got settled. So he slipped over north—that—day—crawled in th' little creek—jest like he said—only 'twas—to shoot Ben—an'—an'—lay—th'—blame—on Jabed.'

The thick voice laboured now, but he must make the matter clear, after some old, forgotten standard of uprightness which he once had owned.

'Said—he'd—kill' me, too, if—I—ever—told—~~a~~ livin'—soul. I knew—he—would—so—so—I—.'

There was no more, but it had been enough. Far and away enough.

*The doctor laid Judd's old hat over his face and rose.

The pause that followed was awkward, hard to handle.

Judge Hiram Macky, Marshal Pettibone, Captain Stephen Reed, all honest men, looked painfully at Jabed Powers. It was the Judge who spoke.

'I hope,' he said, 'that you will understand, Jabed. The Law demands—'

'I know,' the old man said, 'and let's say no more about it. The Law has been served this day. All law, I think. I am content.'

But the great matter of Rainbow Valley was not quite finished.

Price Malloy stepped into the circle of men and looked at them, particularly at those two who had come on foot to join the posse from beside the lighted wagons.

'Adam Dunlavy,' he said, 'Thomas Smith—are you determined beyond all persuasion to pre-empt my land? I notice—we all can—that you have taken the best, the very heart of the valley. You have left ~~me~~ little—and you are in force. I could kill you one by one and I'd be right, for a man protects his own. Speak up now before these witnesses. Are you determined?'

'Yes,' Dunlavy said with dogged defiance, 'we are. No one man's got a right to so much land—and we've got families. Yes, Malloy, we stay.'

'But how'll you live, man,' Captain Stephen said, 'your backer's gone. It's plain that Sylvester Spink is dead.'

'Th' gold he put up for us is still at Hank Baker's store—in all our names, isn't it?'

'It is,' the store man said ruefully, 'a year's supply.'

Dunlavy snapped his fingers; turned away.

'That settles it,' he said.

But there was one final word to be put to it.

Price Malloy turned and looked at Lovelace Powers, deep into her eyes.

'What do you say, Lovelace?' he asked quietly. 'Shall we make a fight?'

For a long moment the girl did not answer. She raised her long and level gaze to where that unspeakable miracle of lighted glory turned the rockface into fire and presently she spoke.

'No,' she said. 'We're clean and decent now. Let's stay that way. No land is worth dead men, widowed women, children without their fathers. Not even'—her low voice was very soft—'not even Rainbow Wall.'

IT was two days later. Another autumn sunrise flamed across the world. The coolness of the coming fall had given place for a sweet, uncertain time to that fore-runner of Paradise, Indian Summer. It smiled in the smoky sunlight, walked with the little warm winds and spoke in the gay chatter of squirrels storing away their winter mast in knot-hole and rocky crevass. It laid its wide and golden palm over all the West Coast country as if in hope and benediction. And at the little flat just south of Reading's Flat a small, determined cavalcade was forming. Once more the teams had been inspanned, the high-wheeled wagons bloomed beneath their canvas stretched over the firm-set bows.

Inside the boxes were those *lares* and *penates* which have spelled the conquest of all far frontiers. Women sat on the high seats, their youngest in their laps, men stood beside them ready for that remembered call 'R-o-l-l O-u-t!' which had heralded their intrepid way across the Plains. In the head wagon, a good outfit bought hurriedly, Jabez Powers sat upright with the lines held tight in eager hands, his old eyes, faded but unquenchable, lifted happily toward the north. A bit beyond Lovelace Malloy sat the small brown mare in the good side-saddle which Annie Baker had given her, her smiling eyes upon the man on the big black stallion who was all the world to her. She wore the little, thin gold band which had outlasted two good marriages, the bright-stoned ring from Yerba Buena. In the trunk inside the wagon those other treasures rested, the bracelet and the jade ear-rings, the thick white silk to make a wedding dress. There'd been no wedding gown at the simple ceremony of the day before when the Reverend Tanney had married her to Price, but, she thought dreamily, maybe there would be one some day—for a slim young daughter

with her father's handsome eyes. It was good silk. And then she heard Price call back to Captain Stephen in the rig behind.

'Will you start us, Captain?' he said loudly, and Captain Reed stood up before his seat.

'R-o-l-l O-u-t!' his deep voice pealed. 'For Oregon!'

Teams leaned in their collars, oxen raised their heavy yokes, the tall wheels creaked. Here and there a woman looked back at the small and empty cabins behind them, some with a vague nostalgia, others with a brave new hope. Here they left the land of slope and ledge and sandy bar where gold lay for the taking by the lucky few. Ahead—beyond the Siskiyous where ran no road as yet, but where, if one wagon had passed another could—spread out that fabled country of the wide, wide valleys, the rushing waters of the Rouge. And so they pulled away, the Conscience People, the folk of the far vision, pioneers once more.

In the middle of the dusty street they stopped, for all of Reading's Flat was there to reach and shake their hands, to wish them God-speed.

'I hate to see you go, Lacey,' Annie Baker said earnestly, 'but I'm glad beyond words for you.'

'No more crullers, Lacey Miss,' someone called, 'an' we're all dam' sorry.'

When the good-byes were over and the little train pulled out a soiled scarecrow in fringed buckskins held up a hand to Price.

'What you doing here, Sam?' the latter said. 'I thought you were with Jabez. Get yourself up there man. We're starting.'

The Mountain Man spat resignedly.

'Nope,' he said. 'I ain't a-goin', Price.'

'Not going! We'll need you, Sam. Come on.'

'I'm sorry, Price. Jest dog-goned sorry, but I can't do it, much as I'd like to. I'm aimin' t' meet Jim Bridger at Sublette's Cut-Off come next month an' go 'long with him over th' Blue Mountains an' down th' Umatilla to th' Columby. They say that there river's broad as a country back East an' deep's th' ocean. I jest got t' see it 'for I plumb peter out. But I'll see ye in th' Spring at Jackson's Fort. So long, boy.'

Malloy looked long at the cocky scarecrow and then he smiled.

'You old polecat!' he said, 'but don't forget. So long.'

